UNDER·THE·DOG·STAR·

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AUSTIN CLARE

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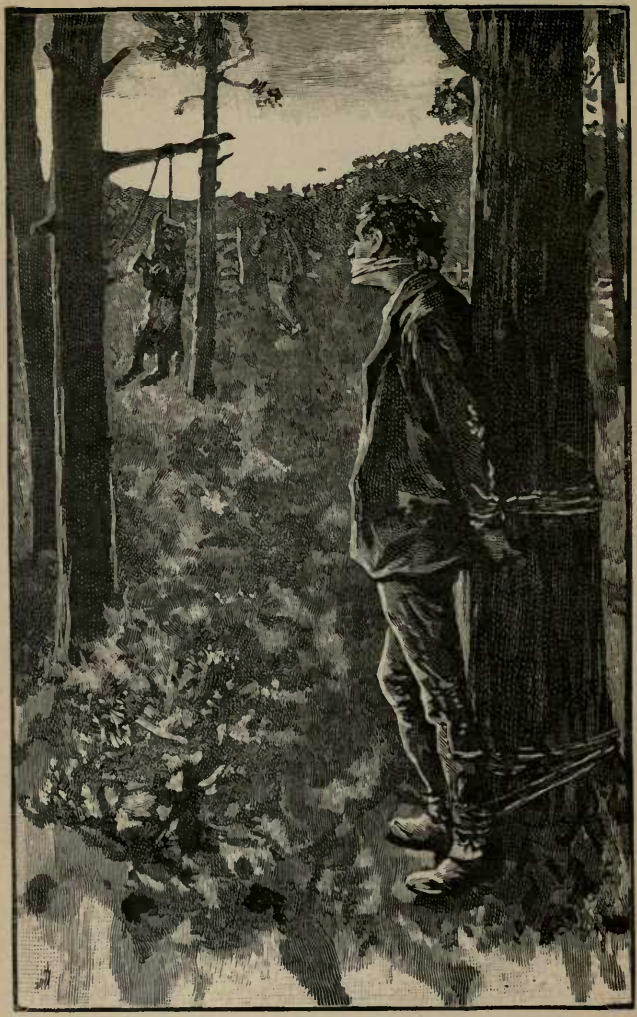

AS HIS TORMENTOR WENT AWAY NICK SHUT HIS ACHING EYES.

Frontispiece. *Page* 226.

UNDER THE DOG-STAR.

A TALE OF THE BORDERS.

BY

AUSTIN CLARE,

AUTHOR OF

"THE CARVED CARTOON," "BY LANTERN LIGHT," "ONE STEP ASTRAY," ETC.

"Give a dog a bad name and hang it"
Old Proverb.

"What mean ye, that ye use this proverb . . .
'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and
The children's teeth are set on edge'?"
EZEKIEL xviii. 2.

ILLUSTRATED BY SIDNEY PAGET.

PUBLISHED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE GENERAL LITERATURE COMMITTEE.

LONDON:
SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE,
NORTHUMBERLAND AVENUE, W.C.;
43, QUEEN VICTORIA STREET, E.C.
BRIGHTON: 129, NORTH STREET.
NEW YORK: E. & J. B. YOUNG AND CO.

TO MY COUSINS

ALFRED AND HARRY FELLOWS,

AND MY GODSONS

CHARLIE GREIG AND GWYNNE JAMES.

UNDER THE DOG-STAR.

CHAPTER I.

THE WANDERER.

ALL day long he had trudged along the muddy roads, going on and on with dogged determination, and still, foot-sore and utterly weary, he pressed onward, with the same set look upon his young face. The dull November evening was closing in. The clouds, which had hung low over the sodden fields and brown moors all day long, seemed to droop lower than ever, swallowing up the hills in their thick, wooliy folds, and creeping down in lines of trailing vapour till they hemmed in the road along which the solitary traveller was plodding.

Perhaps, to look at the lad, it would be more correct to say "tramp," instead of "traveller," for anything more wanting in the dignity and

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respectability with which one associates the latter name could scarcely have been found. His clothes were little more than a mass of rags, his toes were through his boots, and the Tam-o'-Shanter which covered his shock of red hair was only fit for the head of a scarecrow.

Yet the lad was not ill-looking. Despite his clothes, despite his homely features, and the hard, dogged expression upon his face, the healthy youth, which belonged to his sixteen years of open-air life, asserted itself and refused to be disguised.

The figure, though lean and angular, was well-knit and squarely built; the skin (under its dirt) was of a wholesome brown; the set lips were as scarlet as the rose-hips which the birds had left here and there by the roadside; and the eyes, for all their joylessness, were clear and good.

The wan light faded more and more.

The river, which followed the base of the hills to the left of the road, ceased to reflect the dying day, and as our tramp crossed the bridge over the tributary burn, where the high-road turns into the main street of the little grey Northumbrian town of Haltwhistle, a thick drizzle began to fall.

The boy's head drooped a little as he passed through the street. He drew his ragged Tam-o'-Shanter down over his brows, and kept his face as much as possible turned away when he passed one of the scattered gas-lamps of the little country town.

One would have said that he was shunning observation.

He gave a little sigh, as of relief, when he had passed the last lamp and was crossing a second bridge over the river outside the town.

The water bubbled along its stony channel below the bridge, but the misty darkness was almost too thick, by this time, to allow of its being seen, especially by eyes newly dazzled by the gas. But the tramp seemed to know well enough where he was. Passing the bridge, he turned sharply to the right, and, after a little more walking, felt for a gate on the left of the road, swung it open, and entered what is known in the north as a "loaning," that is, a lane along which cattle are driven on their way to be milked.

There were no cattle there now, but the boy could feel with his ill-shod feet the prints made by their hoofs in the miry road. No, he was not mistaken. He knew well enough where he was.

There were trees on either side of him, the remains, perhaps, of a former avenue. Standing still for a moment, he could hear the faint sound made by the drip of the mist-drops from their leafless boughs, and feel them upon his upturned face.

He drew another deep breath and moved on again. The ground in front of him began to rise. He seemed to be climbing a hill.

He looked up, the dogged, joyless look in his face changing to one of eagerness, not unmixed with anxiety.

He was beyond the trees now, and the sky,

perhaps under the influence of a rising moon, hidden somewhere behind the mist, had lightened to a pale grey background of cloud. Against this stood out the dark masses and broken lines of what seemed to be a ruined castle. The windows and loopholes were dark and unglazed. No light, to show habitation, shone through any of them.

To the left of the ruined keep, the tramp opened another gate under an ivied archway and passed into what seemed to be a farmyard. Here, at least, were the signs of life.

Through an open door came a dusty stream of light, and the regular sound of milk falling into a milking-pail. The lad stopped and listened, his breath coming more quickly as he did so. He could see, also, how the cheerful glow of a fire shone through a window opposite to where he stood, and hear the stamp of horses in the stable somewhere on the left.

Presently, a hand came and drew down the blind over the window. But still the firelight filtered cheerily through the chinks, in warm, red contrast to the chill of the November evening and the clammy greyness of the falling mist.

The tramp leaned against the gate, while his eyes fixed themselves wistfully on the light. He seemed in no haste to move, though the door opposite to him had been the goal towards which he had pressed so determinately all that day. It seemed enough for him, at present, to know that he had arrived.

There was a movement in the byre. The sound of milking came to an end. The light flickered, and, after a minute or two, a girl came out carrying two milking-skeels, followed by a boy with a lantern in his hand.

Without noticing the tramp at the gate, they crossed the yard and went into the house. Then, after a few minutes' longer hesitation, the tramp followed them, knocked at the door, and, hardly giving time for an answer, lifted the latch and walked in.

The combined light of lamp and fire, shining full in his eyes, almost blinded him at first after the darkness outside. He stood, like one dazed, trying to make out the figures round the hearth, but, for the moment, quite unable to do so.

His ears were keen enough, however, to take in all the sounds which met them.

A small dog barked furiously, and rushed towards the new-comer in a perfect frenzy of duty joyfully fulfilled. There was the peculiar rasping sound of chairs pushed back over a sanded stone floor, a shrill exclamation from a woman's throat, and a little cry of surprise from a girl.

Then the tramp's eyes cleared, and he saw plainly the comfortable farm-kitchen and its inmates.

There were the usual signs of comfort without luxury, which mark the house of the smaller north-country farmer—the rag hearthrug on the clean, stone floor; the plainly cushioned armchairs on each side of the wide fireplace; the polished dresser.

with its store of crockery and pewter-pots and plates. The plain wooden table, made for use and not show, was set out for the evening meal with plenty of wholesome food.

But the new-comer did not need to look at all these details. He knew them by heart already. It was the living part of the scene which fixed his attention.

A tall, gaunt woman was standing in the middle of the floor, the steaming potato-pan, which she had just taken from the fire, still in her hands. She wore a rusty-black gown, a clean white apron, and one of those abominations, dear to certain elderly women of her class, known as "a black cap," under which her grizzled hair was severely brushed down on either side of a hard-featured face.

Behind her was the same girl who had just come in from milking—a plump, fair little body of, perhaps, fourteen years old, with flaxen hair of the kind that refuses to lie flat, wide, blue, childish eyes, and an apple-blossom face. She was holding a chair by the back with both her hands, and her full, rosy lips were wide-open with surprise. A black-haired lad was taking off his boots by the fire, but had stopped midway in the act, with one on his foot and one in his hand, as the door opened.

"Well, I never! If it isn't yon lad come back!" This is what the woman said, and the words came with a shrillness which spoke of no pleasure in the return.

"Nick, is't *you?* Where have ye been all this

while? Viper, be quiet, can't ye? Dinna ye see it's Nick?"

The girl's sweet voice was pleasant after the woman's shrill tones; but, at the same time, the words showed more surprise than joy.

The black-haired boy by the fire said nothing. He sat there stolidly, with the boot, which he had just taken off, still in his hand, and an expression which was the reverse of pleasant on his dark, handsome face.

It was left for the fourth member of the party, a little, sandy, wiry-haired terrier, with a shrewish little face and prick ears, to give the welcome which his superiors denied. At the girl's words, Viper had suddenly ceased the barking with which, as a dutiful watch-dog, she had felt bound to salute a stranger. A careful investigation of the ragged legs had convinced the fussy little household guardian that the new-comer, though at first sight he had with justice been classed with vagrants, a set of people which all right-minded dogs abhor, was less strange to the scent than Viper had supposed. The snuffing had ended in a dubious wag of the tail, a cautious attempt at fawning, and finally in a lick of the hand, which said as plainly as any words could have done, "I've seen you before, some time or other. My remembrance of you, though not vivid, is pleasant, and I bid you welcome."

The boy bent down to caress the little creature, and the water came into his eyes all against his will.

"She kens me, I'm thinkin'," he said in rather a husky voice. "It's the bit pup I left behind, likely?"

"Ay, it's Viper," said the girl. "She made a big set when ye went away. Nick, whatever did you gan for to leave us like that?"

The girl's voice was full of reproach.

"Ye'd a deal better ax what he's come back for," said the woman, severely, as she proceeded to turn the potatoes out into a dish.

"A bad shillen's boon' to turn up again, mother," growled the black-haired lad, pulling off his other boot, and slipping his feet into a pair of carpet shoes. "I always said Nick would come back yan o' these fine days."

"And you said reet, as usual, Teddy. But that's not sayen' he's goin' to bide. It's a deal easier to throw away yer bread-and-butter than to pick it up again when the fancy takes you. There's them as folks warm in their bosoms only to find them *vipers* who sting in return."

Hearing her name pronounced with emphasis, the little, sandy terrier looked up with a short bark, evidently thinking that supper-time had come.

"Drat the dog!" cried the farmer's wife, impatiently. "Canna ye take her in t' back-kitchen and give her her meat, Marg'et, instead o' starin' at yon lad?" Then, setting down the empty pan upon the fender, she turned to the young tramp, who was still standing by the door. "Come now,

you," she said sharply, "move out o' this. We diven't want any such good-for-nothings here."

"But, missus, I've come heam!"

The boy said the words wistfully, and looked into the hard-featured face as though he could not believe that the sentence was really meant.

"Heam!" the woman cried scornfully; "this is no heam for sich as you. It was, *yance*, mebbe, for ye were housed here for mony a lang day, when naebody else would tak' ye in. And kindly tret too, ye were—a deal better nor ye desarved. And how did ye sarve us for't? Why, ran awa' in a tantrum because words were said that didn't please ye! What were *you* to pick and choose, I should like to ken?"

"But, missus, I've come back," said the boy again. He seemed too utterly weary to be able to think of anything else, but just the one fact that here he was, and here, at all costs, he must remain.

"Ay, you've come back, I can see that without your tellen' me," said the farmer's wife, no whit moved by the lad's wistful words and weary look. "But whae telt ye ye might come back? Not I, at ony rate. Come, ye'd better be movin'; the maister-man 'll be in directly."

But still Nick did not stir. He stood, looking at the woman, with the same pathetic, uncomprehending look on his thin face, the moisture dripping from his rags upon the clean stone floor.

"Let him have a bite to eat, onyhow," pleaded the apple-faced lassie, coming back into the kitchen,

and laying a hand on her mother's arm. "He looks fairly starved, does pier Nick, and fit to drop. There, sit down, lad. Mother 'll not deny you a bite and sup, onyhow, if go you must. Oh dear, but ye *were* a silly to run awa'!"

She pushed a chair towards the young tramp, into which he dropped without a word.

The farmer's wife looked at him, as he sat there, his face white through the brown of tan and dirt.

"My, ye're reet there, Maggie. It was a fool's trick to give up a good heam, and he's suffered for't, as folks can see. Here, lad, I winna deny ye a taitee; it'll warm ye and put a bit o' life into ye afore ye gan. Bad as ye've served us, I diven't want ye to die upon the road for the want o' a bite and a sup. Meggie, get him a drink o' tea."

The boy opened the eyes which were closing for weariness and faintness, as he felt the hot potato in his hand. He looked at it for a moment, and then began to eat greedily, drinking down the tea, that Meggie handed him, in great gulps. The others watched him silently till he had finished. Then the woman spoke again.

"There, now," she said briskly, "ye'll do better, I'm thinkin'. It's time to be off."

But Nick did not stir.

"Diven't ye hear me, lad?" the mistress said more sharply. "Quick march!"

"Whae's to march?" asked a new voice.

The door had been opened, unperceived by those in the room, and a man came in, wrapped in a

shepherd's plaid, with the mist-drops thick on his tweed cap, his hair, and whiskers. He was a wiry, well-built countryman, looking young for his years, which counted between fifty and sixty. He had a ruddy complexion, a keen, cold blue eye, dark hair and whiskers, and a thin-lipped mouth and well-developed chin, which spoke of an obstinate nature.

"Why, whae've ye got here?" he went on, shutting the door behind him, and unwinding his plaid. "It's sae mirk outside I can hardlys mak' oot onything now I'm in t' light! Whae is't, Meggie?"

This to his young daughter, who had taken her father's plaid and was hanging it up to dry.

"It's Nick, faither; he's come back, and moother wants to set him off again."

"Nick, is it?" asked the man, turning to look at the lad more closely. "My sakes, and so it is! I'd hardly have kent him again, he's that waxed (grown).

"Ay, but he's half-starved, faither, and dead beat. Ye'll let him bide to-neet, onyhow, won't ye?" pleaded the girl.

"Whisht, Meggie! The sooner he's off t' better," said the farmer's wife. "Tell him to gan, John. He winna stir for me."

But John did not obey. Masterful as the wife was with the world at large, once the goodman was at home, her word was no longer law.

He stood, looking silently at the boy, who, made

drowsy by the food and warmth, seemed dropping off to sleep in his chair.

"Let him bide, faither," pleaded the girl again.

"Ay, he can bide till mornin', onyway," said the master, slowly. "He's dead beat, that's what he is. Give him a shake-down in the little cart-shed, Teddy, where Viper lies. *She'll* see to his behaviour, wife, if ye're feared o' that. Man, but he's waxed some since he left us!"

The master looked with a sort of wondering admiration at the tall, well-knit form of the young tramp, as Teddy, evidently much against the grain, took him by the arm and marched him off to the cart-shed, followed by the dog.

Not till he was out in the air again, and moving across the yard, did Nick become fully conscious of what was taking place. At first a horror came over him that the threat of the mistress was actually in course of being carried out.

At the thought, he stopped suddenly and tried to shake himself free from Teddy's grasp.

"Nay, I'll bide," he said sullenly.

"Be quiet, cannot ye?" was the testy answer. "Isn't t' cart-shed good enough for ye, then? If moother and I'd had our ways, ye'd have been marched clean off the premises, ye beggar, you! Kick up a row, and I'll do it yet."

But Nick was in no condition to "kick up a row." The promise of the cart-shed at that moment was quite enough for him. He was worn out, body

and mind, and sank at once into the straw, where Teddy pushed him, with passive indifference.

But when his conductor was gone and the door of the shed had closed behind him, the drowsy comfort which had stolen upon him in the warm kitchen began to yield to a condition of things much less pleasant. The air of the shed was cold, his rags were wet, and he soon began to shiver. His mind, too, awoke to the misery of the situation, as well as his body. The sense of the utter want of welcome with which every one had met him came over him, for the first time, with a sharp stab. He had so longed to be here, and those he had come to seemed to think of nothing but how soon he could be made to go.

To realize that you are without a friend in the world, nay, even without a well-wisher, brings with it a terrible sense of dreary loneliness ; and the boy's soft young heart felt it sorely. As his teeth began to chatter, sobs, which he could not restrain, shook his body no less than did the cold.

The sounds caused a stir among the straw not far from where he lay, and, presently, a warm, hairy creature crept near to the sobbing boy, nestled a moist nose into his hand, and then, failing to attract notice, began to lick the tears from his cheeks. The boy's sobs suddenly stopped ; he stole an arm round the hairy body, and drew it close up against his breast.

"Viper," he whispered, "is't thoo, lass?"

At the sound of the voice and the touch of the

hand the little terrier whined softly with pleasure, and nestled closer into the boy's bosom, so that the chills which shook him began to subside. His heart, too, was touched and warmed by the dumb affection, and comfort stole slowly back again.

Here, at least, was one creature to give him a welcome on his return.

CHAPTER II.

A STROKE OF BUSINESS.

THE farmer's family, meanwhile, was sitting at supper in the kitchen.

While the business of eating was going on, little or nothing was said.

The mistress, as she helped her husband and children to bacon and potatoes, pursed up her mouth, as who would say, "Well, it's no business of mine, I suppose; but *my* judgment does not go with what has just been done."

Teddy looked sullen, and little Margaret, though she had got her way, was evidently wise enough to know that the less said about it, just now, the better.

The master, John Ridley, to give him his full name, sat in his armchair at the fire end of the table, and seemed to be ruminating some particular thought as he chewed the savoury food.

When supper was over, he drew up his chair to the hearth, filled and lit his pipe, and began to smoke, still, to all appearance, ruminating. Teddy took his seat on the settle at the other side of the great fireplace, which had, evidently, served in old days for the burning of logs, but had now been filled in with a modern range. He did not smoke, his father considering the luxury unnecessary for a lad of his years, but he leaned his dark face on his two hands, set his elbows on his knees, and ruminated like his father.

Mrs. Ridley and Meggie bustled about between the two kitchens, washing up and putting away the supper things.

Not till his wife and daughter had sat down in their turn, Mrs. Ridley in the armchair by her son, Meggie on a wooden stool at her father's feet, did the farmer give his family the benefit of his long meditations.

"Well," he said slowly, removing his pipe from his lips, and holding it in his hand, "that's t' third hirin' I've been to and I canna light on."

"Why," asked Mrs. Ridley, plying her knitting-needles, which she had taken up as she sat down, "were there nae lads? There's generally plenty o' them sort when a body isn't wantin' them."

"Ay, plenty. But when yan *dis* want them they're, mostlys, hard to hire."

"Wantin' over mickle wage, likely?"

"Ay."

"Well, John, if wages is up, it canna be helped;

ye'll just have to give in. We canna do, wantin' a lad, wi' you at t' pit nearlings all day since they made you viewer, and the beasts all in."

"If Teddy, there, was worth his salt we could dae well enough," said Ridley, with a glance across the hearth at his dark-browed son. "He's gettin' a big lad, and might dae a deal mair than he dis."

Teddy frowned, but made no reply. It was his mother who took up the cudgels on his behalf.

"A growen' lad like Teddy disn't dae wi' ower hard wark," she said tartly. "And, besides, ye're gey oft wanten' him down at t' pit. It's me and Meggie as t' work falls on heaviest, and we're nowther on us fit to slave oot o' doors in winter weather."

"Nor I diven't ask it of you nowther," was the rather testy answer.

"Then we maun have a lad," responded Mrs. Ridley, decidedly, feeling that the logic was all on her side.

"Ay, but them big wages I *winnot* give," was the equally decided rejoinder.

"Then where's the lad to come from?" asked the wife.

The husband paused a moment, then, looking across the hearth to see how she would take it, out came the thought which he had been ruminating all the evening.

"There's Nick," he said slowly.

Mrs. Ridley dropped her knitting and almost shrieked.

"Nick!" she exclaimed, a red spot of colour appearing on each of her high cheek-bones. "Nick! That good-for-nothing, ungrateful rascal? Surely, John, ye'd niver go for to have *him* back again?"

"Why not?" asked her husband, quietly.

"Why not? Ye ask me why not? Why, man alive, there's *ivery*thing again' it. Didn't he run awa' when we had him before? and will ye try him again? What good can ye expect to get out o' a chap like yon? A nameless brat, whose moother was nothin' but a tramp, and whose faither nobody kens. It's not to be expected that a lad like yon should turn out well. I told ye that afore, and it's come to pass as I said. Didn't I ken that hizzy Sarah——"

"Whisht, woman!" said the master, sternly, holding up his hand to stem the goodwife's torrent of angry speech, which, indeed, only he had the power of stemming, "remember, the bairns is here. Meggie, lass," he went on, his voice softening as he spoke to his little daughter, "go and fetch my backy-pooch out of the pocket o' my top-coat. It's hingin' aback o' the bedroom door."

The girl rose and went upstairs, rather reluctantly, for she was interested in the result of the struggle between her father and mother on the subject of Nick.

"Ay, there're the bairns to consider. Ye're reet there, John," began the wife again, after a little pause. "But that's just what I was goin' to put to ye. Ye diven't consider the mischief they may

get from the example of a chap like yon;" she jerked her head in the direction of the cart-shed, setting the bits of jet, which did duty for flowers on her black cap, all a-quiver. "'Evil communications corrupt good manners;' that's in the Scriptures, and ye canna deny 't. And, besides, there's Meggie. She's gettin' a big girl, and she and yon lad were a deal too friendly when he was here before, to my thinkin'."

"Hoots, wife!" snorted the farmer, contemptuously. "She's nobbut a bairn, is Meggie, and he's but little mair."

"Ay, but bairns at that yage 'll not be bairns much longer," answered Mrs. Ridley, with a sagacious nod.

"There's nae danger, I tell you," was her husband's testy reply. Opposition always made him obstinate, and his wife but seldom ventured to oppose his will as she was doing this evening.

But the woman still refused to throw down her arms. She shifted the attack to another point.

"And how much good did ye find him afore?" she asked caustically. "Ye said yerself he wasn't worth his meat, and ye thrashed him that last day because he answered ye back."

"He's grown since then," said the farmer. "He'll be worth his meat now, and his clothes as well, and cheap at that. He nobbut wants good feedin' to mak' a fine-like lad; I can see that. He's starved now, and weakly for want o' food, as I take it; but that'll mend. If I like his looks in the mornin'

as much as I did to-neet, I'll tell him he can bide. Nick! Why, he's come in the nick o' time, he has! Eh, Meggie?"

The farmer laughed at his own little joke, and pinched the pink cheek of his little daughter, as she handed him his tobacco-pouch, and seated herself again at his feet.

"And what if he serves us as he did afore, and runs away?" asked Mrs. Ridley, with a last effort at contradiction.

"Ye'll have to see that he's made mair comfortable, this time," was her husband's reply, as he lit his pipe at the fire. "Give him plenty o' good meat, let him lie warm, and dinna be always fratching at him; he'll bide then. Ay, and I'll get the work done, and be saved the wage," he muttered contentedly to himself, between the puffs of his pipe. Then he leaned back in his chair, and gave himself up to comfort. If the day's labour had been thrown away, he was conscious of having made up for it by the work of the evening. His rumination had brought forth excellent results, and he had the pleasing sense of having, once more, shown that he was master in his own house.

When, seventeen years ago, he had married Nancy Robinson, his friends had jokingly prophesied that the grey mare would prove the better horse. But John Ridley had shown them, long ago, to be false prophets. Next to his shrewdness in business and his tidy balance at the bank, the farmer and pit-viewer prided himself on his strong will, and there

were few that had once tried to stand against it who could be found to say that his boasting was empty words.

For all his usually quiet ways, John Ridley was known throughout the district as a man of iron. Only one hand there was that had any power to move him when he had once decided upon anything, and that was the soft little hand of his daughter Meggie. Yet there were limits even to her power over her father's heart, and, child though she was, she had learnt to know them.

Some may think it strange that, once defied by one of his dependants, a man so hard and determined as was John Ridley, should have been so ready to overlook past offences. But this readiness did not in any way belie the character of the man. Not to mention the pleasure it gave him to get a servant and save the wages, it flattered his vanity to think that, in the long run, his tussle with the young rebel had ended in victory. Nick had run away because of hard words and harder blows; yet, in spite of these, he had returned, glad and willing to bend his neck again to the yoke which he had thrown off. There is a satisfaction for some men in being able to beat the dog which has disobeyed them, when it crouches again at their feet; and it was just this sort of satisfaction which John Ridley was tasting, as he smoked his pipe that evening in the chair of honour by his own fireside. He had silenced his wife, he had saved his pocket, and now all was in train for breaking in and using

the self-willed young dog who had so vainly defied him.

John Ridley, for all his apparent readiness to forgive, went to bed, that night, with no more consideration in his heart for the friendless boy that slept in his outhouse than was felt by the woman who would have thrust him from her door.

CHAPTER III.

AN ORDEAL.

"AND now, gan to t' car-shed and bring in yon chap to his breakfas'," said the farmer, next morning, when, the early work being over, he entered the kitchen.

"Ay, and see that he gets a good wesh at t' well afore he comes in here, since yer faither's set on his takin' his meat wi' us!" Mrs. Ridley called after her son, as he slowly went to fulfil his father's bidding.

No more than any one else did Teddy dare openly to resist that iron will. But, nevertheless, it was often against the grain; and if, behind backs, he could evade an uncongenial order, Master Teddy's conscience did not trouble itself to protest.

Nick, meanwhile, had already awakened. Little Viper was not accustomed to go on sleeping after the stir of foddering the cattle had begun in the yard. There was a hole at the bottom of the door

through which she could creep out when she had had enough of bed, and though, this morning, out of consideration for her bedfellow, she had lain longer than usual, yet her movements had ended in rousing Nick.

At first, after his deep and dreamless sleep of full twelve hours, he could not make out where he was, or how it came to pass that a little brown object, warm and hairy, was lying upon his breast, busily engaged in licking his face. He opened his eyes.

Above him was a heather-thatched roof, with rough, heavy rafters crossing it at regular intervals, and holes in the thatch, here and there, through which long, dusty rays of light slanted, like Jacob's ladder in the Scripture prints, from heaven to earth.

Added to what came in at Viper's hole in the door, this light was just sufficient to show the outlines of a small cart, a farm-gig, and a raking-machine, with their shafts up in the air, on the wheels of which some stout, matronly-looking hens were roosting. These latter were just beginning to rouse themselves from their slumbers, with clucks, and caws, and such-like inarticulate noises as are common to hens of their figure, and which answer to the grunts and yawns of awakening humanity of the stout and elderly sort.

A vigorous wagging of the ropy tail affixed to the hairy creature which sat on his breast, greeted the boy's opening eyes, and contributed still further to bring him to a consciousness of his surroundings.

In a flash of memory he seemed to see himself and a child-companion seated aloft in that very gig, whipping an imaginary horse and careering away into such an unknown country of sunny brightness as his late wanderings had now almost convinced him was nowhere to be fond.

Yes, this must be the little cart-shed at Bellister, where he and Meggie Ridley had so often played together when both were children (the boy had now quite ceased to consider himself as a child); and this creature which was licking his face was none other than the terrier pup which had shared their frolic in the straw, that then, as now, lay piled in the corner.

The boy sat up, sending the little terrier sprawling suddenly on its back.

"Viper," he said softly, with a sigh of satisfaction, "so I've won heam!"

Viper answered by a whine of pleasure, and such an accelerated wagging of the tail as seemed to say that she, for one, was delighted at the wanderer's return.

Nick caressed her to her heart's content; but the remembrances that every one at Bellister had not quite echoed the sentiments of this little terrier came to temper his satisfaction, and made him slow to leave the shed and to try once more his fortune in the house. While he was still hesitating, the door opened, and a boy's dark head was thrust in.

"Nick," said a surly voice, which he recognized as Teddy's, "ye're to come in to breakfas'."

Nick got up with alacrity, for the pangs of hunger awoke at the word "breakfast," and shook the straw from his clothes.

"Eh, what a sight ye are, lad!" exclaimed Teddy, as he came out into the yard.

"Am I?" asked Nick, innocently.

The other boy burst out laughing.

"Ye're for all the world like the scarecrow we set up in the cornfields," he said, scornfully. "Ye'd scare all the birds, first-rate, if we could use ye now, just as ye are, in them rags, with yer hair all on end, and as full of straws as mother's cushion is full o' pins, and yer face as black as though ye'd been up the chimbley. Take a douse at the well, lad, and a spell at the reddin'-keam * in the back-kitchen, afore ye show yer face to mother; that's my advice."

He ran off whistling, leaving Nick to follow his directions.

The mist had cleared off the hills, and the sky, where the sun would presently rise, was free from clouds, but, nevertheless, the November morning was sufficiently chilly to make the well-water a stinging experience. Nick did not spare the splashing, however. The summons to breakfast was a good omen, in his eyes, and if he could pass muster under the sharp eyes of Mrs. Ridley, he still had hopes that "the master" would allow him to stay.

He splashed and scrubbed till face and neck and hands, at least, were clean; then, going to a side

* In some north-country farm-houses and cottages, a comb, called the "redding-comb," hangs handy for the use of the whole family.

door, he stole into the empty back-kitchen, and vigorously applied the comb to his matted locks, careless of the agony caused by too long neglect of the same.

This done, he gravely surveyed the result in the little hand-glass which hung beside the comb, not for the self-gratification which a girl might have drawn in from the sight of what was reflected there, but simply to see how it was likely to appear in the critical eyes of Mrs. Ridley. Poor Nick shook his head rather sadly, as he turned his back on the mirror and made his way towards the kitchen.

The immediate result of such a scrubbing as his countenance had undergone is not always becoming, and, what with cold water and trepidation, his cheeks glowed red as the rising sun, and his eyes pricked uncomfortably, as he made his appearance before the assembled family.

The Ridleys were already sitting at table when he went into the front kitchen. Mrs. Ridley had the tea-tray before her, and was sipping a cup of tea, while her husband and children were busily attacking their steaming porridge and milk.

A plate of the same was set by an empty chair at the end of the table nearest the door, which, of old, had been the place occupied by Nick, and here he now sat down without a word, and began to ply his porridge-spoon with the rest.

John Ridley was not a man to hold much conversation at meals, and, consequently, not a word

was said, nor did he bestow any notice on the newcomer till his plate was empty and he had pushed it back and taken the cup of tea which was wont to follow the porridge, from his wife's hands. Then he lifted his keen eyes, and looked long and critically at the boy's face, still bent over the porridge-plate at the end of the table.

Apparently Nick did not notice him any more than, a moment before, he had noticed Nick. He went on supping up the warm nourishing mess which was set before him without once looking up till the last spoonful had disappeared down his throat. Not till then did he raise his eyes, and, encountering the whole family battery turned upon him, grew redder than ever.

Every one else seemed to have finished breakfast and to be watching him. Even Viper was sitting up on her hind legs by his chair, intreating him, with dumb, wistful brown eyes, to remember his bedfellow and leave her a spoonful behind. The blood rushed in tingling waves to poor Nick's face, so that he could scarcely see. He felt that the ordeal had begun, and that on it depended his future life.

"Come here, lad," said Ridley at last, when, according to poor Nick's feelings, the tall old clock in the corner had been ticking molten drops of lead upon his brain for at least an hour—"come here, and let's have a good look at ye."

A good look! Had he not taken that already? Nick rose to his feet and stumbled across the

floor till he came to a stand in front of the arm-chair by the fire where Ridley was now sitting.

The farmer indicated the exact spot on the rag-rug where the runaway was to remain, the finger, which he held up for the purpose, remaining suspended for some time after Nick had taken up his position.

It is never agreeable to be pointed at, and the sensation that he was so, and that every other eye in the room was following the direction of the master's, and every ear on the alert to hear what he would say, made the boy, if possible, even hotter than before.

For another minute Ridley was silent, and looked the boy carefully up and down the while, as though measuring his inches and calculating how much work might be got out of his wiry young frame.

"Well, and what have ye got to say for yersel'?" he asked at last.

The boy fidgeted first to one foot, then to the other, but he made no answer.

"Come, tells us why ye ran awa'?"

Still no reply.

An angry sparkle came into the man's steel-blue eyes.

"Can't ye speak, ye young rascal, ye?" he said impatiently. "If ye've got nothing to say for yersel', what garred (made) ye show yer face here again, eh?"

Thus bated, Nick managed to find words at length.

"I couldna bide awa' nae longer," he muttered; "I joost *had* to come back."

"Just so. Ye rued yer folly in leavin' a good heam, eh?"

"Mebbe," answered the boy, sullenly.

"And where hae ye been since?"

"Oh, joost onywhere! Well, then," as Ridley pulled him up sternly, "I hired for a bit, Bramptonways, but I didn't care for t' folk, and——"

"Ye ran away again?" asked Ridley, sarcastically, as the boy came to a standstill.

"Ay."

Ridley laughed, and the laugh was echoed by his son, who had taken his usual seat on the settle.

Nick raised his head, and cast an angry glance in Teddy's direction; but, catching sight of a pair of soft blue eyes anxiously fixed upon him, the anger died out of his face, and he turned again towards his questioner.

"And what next?" asked Ridley.

"I travelled a bit wi' some tinkers, till——"

"Well, what? Ye left them and all?"

"Noa, I took bad, and they left *me*."

"Well?"

"I lay a-back o' a dyke till somebody found me and took me to the House."

"And a fit place for sich as you!" broke in Mrs. Ridley, who was beginning to clear the table, impatient of the time and attention which her husband was bestowing on this young tramp. "Why couldn't ye bide there?"

"Whisht, wife!" said Ridley, turning round sharply to put down the interruption.

"Well, Nick," he continued, as she subsided into silence, only rattling the plates and cups to relieve her feelings a little—"come, lad, get on wi' yer story. It's time I was at t' pit."

"They kept me there till I mended, and when I came out, I just tramped back here. That's all."

"And ye want to bide?"

The boy looked up with a sparkle in his eye, but he only said "Ay."

"Well, if I let bygones be bygones, will ye be a good lad in future?"

"Ay."

"Well, what div ye think, missus?" Ridley turned and appeared to consult his wife, though both he and she knew full well that he had come to a decision already, and would carry it out, whatever she might say. "It 'ud be a charity, eh?"

Mrs. Ridley made no answer. She had no mind to play a second in her husband's farce.

"Could we do wi'm, think ye?" he asked again; and, seeing that he meant to have an answer, she threw him a sour reply, as she carried the breakfast-things into the back-kitchen.

"Ye'll please yersel', Ridley, I suppose. Ye ken weel enough arlready what *I* think. But there, ye can please yersel'!"

"Vara weel, then, I'll tak' ye back, lad," said the master, turning again to his submissive rebel, "on t' same terms as before," he added, after a little

pause. "Only, now ye're grown bigger, I shall expect mair work. And, mind, if ye serve us again as ye did last time, ye need niver show yer face again at Bellister. Now, gan and muck t' byres. Ye'll find the barra' and brush and shovel in t' auld spot." He got up, called to his son to follow him, and the two went off to the pit where Ridley was viewer.

CHAPTER IV.

"SOME PLEASED."

WHEN the master was gone, Nick stood for some time quite still in the same spot where his examination had taken place. Then he drew a deep breath and ruffled his thick red hair with his hands, as though he wished to assure himself that he had come out of the ordeal with his head still on his shoulders.

He looked round. Yes, this was the old kitchen at Bellister. The struggle to maintain his position was over, and here he was in possession of the field.

At first the boy thought himself alone. But that glance round, presently, made him aware of a little figure standing near the doorway, and a pair of eager blue eyes turned in his direction.

"And are ye *really* to bide, Nick?" asked a sweet voice.

"Ay. Are ye pleased, Meggie?"

The girl crossed the floor till she was quite close to the ragged figure on the hearthrug.

"Ay," she said, "I'm some pleased. But why did ye go for to leave us, Nick?"

There was reproach in her voice and look.

The boy was touched.

"There was many a time I wished I hadn't," he said earnestly.

She stood looking into the face of her old companion, as though trying to find out whether this was the Nick she had known, or whether he had turned into some one else. Apparently the examination was not quite satisfactory; for, presently, the child said, rather wistfully—

"It's alang o' the sickness, I suppose?"

"What?"

"I diven't joost ken," she answered slowly, "but, somehow, ye diven't look *quite* as ye used. There's little holes in yer face, Nick, not joost all over, and I only see them now I'm quite close, but ye didn't use to look like *that*, and——"

Her breath seemed to catch in her throat, and she stopped short.

"Oh, that's nowt!" answered the boy, cheerfully. "It's nobbut skin-deep, Meggie. I'm joost t' same if ye could look t' other side. It was t' small pox made them holes."

"The small pox!" she cried, starting away from him in horror. "Was *that* the badness ye had? Oh, Nick, pier Nick!"

"Ye needn't be scared at me, Meggie," he said reassuringly. "I was quite mended long since. They wouldn't have let me out if I hadn't been; and, besides, it took me near ten days to tramp back here."

"And what brought ye back, lad? Ye get nae wages here. Ye'd better have hired again."

"Folks wouldn't have taken such a ragged lad as me," he answered, with a rueful look at his clothes, "and, besides——"

"Well, what?"

"I couldn't bide away from Bellister. Whenever I dreamed, it was here I was again, lakin' (playing) wi' you in t' ruins. I was *forced* to come back."

He said the words with a vehemence which showed their truth.

Meggie looked at him thoughtfully, with her hands behind her back.

"It's queer," she said presently.

"What's queer?"

"Why, that ye went away and then had to come back. If ye liked Bellister *that* much, I diven't ken why ever ye left it."

"Nor me nowther," answered Nick. "I'd niver have gone, not if they'd kest up things at me niver sae bad, nor licked me niver sae hard, if I'd kent how I'd feel when my back was turned. It's *cruel* to feel that a body has nowther a heam nor a friend!"

Meggie was silent. Such a condition as Nick

described was quite outside of her childish experience.

"Mebbe, faither 'll lick you again," she remarked, presently.

"*Let* him!" said Nick; "I'll bide."

"Even if folks here isna' friendly?"

"There's arlways you and Viper," answered the boy. "I feel a deal comfortabler now, i' my inside, than iver I did since I runned awa'. Ay, I'll bide."

He said it with as much decision, and planted his burst boots on the hearthrug as firmly as though he were a general who has won a position of vantage at the cost of blood, and would rather die than abandon it.

Meggie laughed.

"Ye'll have to please t' auld folk then," she said, "and ye'll find that none sae easy. Faither wants a deal o' work out o' t' lad that's to bide here. He sacked the one we had this last term, 'coz he didn't get through what faither thought he ought, and he'll sack ye and arl if he isn't satisfied. And then, there's moother——"

She paused here, as though words failed her to express all that would be needed to please Mrs. Ridley. But Nick had heard enough.

His master had set him a job, and here he was, chatting with his old playfellow instead of doing it. She was right in reminding him that this was not the way to maintain the position so hardly won.

"He telt me to muck t' byres. I maun set aboot

it," the boy said hastily. "We'll have anither crack (chat) when arl's done, Meggie."

"Ay. And I've a pail o' water to fetch from t' well. There's moother carlin' of me! Dear sakes, shouldn't I catch it if she saw me now! Ay, ye're a good-for-nothin' lad, Nick, garrin' (making) me waste my time this gait (way)!" With a merry laugh she picked up her pail and ran out into the yard, leaving her companion to follow more slowly on his way to the byres.

A broad smile beamed out on his scarred face as he followed the flitting figure with his eyes.

"*She* isn't mickle altered," he said to himself. "A bit bigger, a bit bonnier, mebbe, but joost t' same sarcy Meggie as I left, a year gone last May Day. Eh, but it's good to be back!"

And "It's good to be back," he said again, after two hours of hard work in the byres, as, having made all clean and tidy, he sat down on the shafts of his barrow and took Viper's head between his knees.

His back ached, his limbs trembled, and the perspiration stood thick on his brow; for, of late, he had become unused to labour, and the strength lost during his severe illness had not yet wholly returned.

"Ay, it's good to be back, Viper," he repeated, as he looked into the brown eyes so lovingly fixed upon him. "What is't the sang says?

> "'Be it niver sae humble,
> There's nae place like heam.'

What doest think, lass? Lickin's and hard words and slavin' here is better nor liberty in ither places, eh? And sae thoo's some pleased to see pier Nick come back? Eh, Viper, lass? And thoo isn't the only one, owther. *She* said so, an' arl. 'Some pleased.' Ay, them was t' words. It's worth a deal to hear a body say that to yan, it is that. There's naebody cared a snuff whether I went or came, whether I died or lived, since I left Bellister. Ay, wag thy bit tail and lick ma hand, my lass, since that's thy way o' sayin' thoo's pleased to see me. I like it, Viper, I dae so. Eh, Viper, but I dinna ken *how* I feel to-day. If I was a bairn, I think I'd greet!" (cry).

And, though Nick considered that he had left childhood far behind, it is not so certain that he did not "greet" tears of joy and tenderness of heart, as he sat there in the dim byre, with his cheek resting against the dog's rough head. And, if he did, what then? There were only Viper and the cows there to see, and the beasts do not betray our weaknesses.

It had taken but a very little love and kindness to touch the heart of this poor wanderer; but a little goes a long way with the friendless of this world.

In the story of a man's life, the date and place of his birth, the names of his father and mother, and a description of the family whence he has sprung, are considered of primary importance. But in the story of poor Nick all these details were

wanting. No one knew for certain when or where he was born. His mother's name was but guessed at, and, as you have already gathered from Mrs. Ridley's tirade, who and what his father was, was a matter even beyond speculation.

Nobody owned poor Nick, and the only place which he had ever called "home" was Bellister. His infancy had been spent in the Haltwhistle Union; and when, at seven years old, the Guardians had seen fit to "board him out," the Ridleys, for reasons of their own, had taken him in.

They were not, at that time, so well-to-do as they had since become, and the money paid for his keep by the Union was a consideration. Moreover, the characters of the farmer and his wife being then the same, and their eyes open to the main chance, they saw the makings of a useful servant in the healthy, hearty little boy. Mrs. Ridley had then young children of her own; and a boy to run errands, and feed the fowls, and do such little odd jobs as cottage children manage to do, even at the tender age of seven, was not unwelcome.

It was Nick who took care of the other two children on the way to and from school; Nick who lifted little Meggie to her feet when she fell down in the mud, and comforted her concerning her bruised knees; Nick who helped the lazy Teddy, though (according to workhouse calculation) but half a year his senior, to learn his lessons of an evening. But the bigger Nick grew and the more useful he became, the more he was "put upon."

Willing and capable though he was, it was held as an article of faith in the household that from such an origin as his nothing good was to be expected. Therefore, toil as he might, he could never win praise, and blame was his daily wage.

Yet, having a boy's light heart and careless nature, Nick was not unhappy. With little Meggie as his friend and companion, he enjoyed many an hour of merry play, hiding among the ruins of the old castle which formed part of the farmstead, rolling down the hill on which it was built, or "making believe" to drive the old gig in the cart-shed. And when, one day, on their return from Haltwhistle, they found Viper, a poor half-drowned pup, struggling, no one knew how, out of the river, and took her home and kept her there (by Meggie's power) to be their pet and plaything, another ingredient of pleasure was added to Nick's life.

Matters might have gone on like this for a good bit longer, had it not been for the return to her native town of a woman who went by the name of Tramping Sal. No one in the district had seen her coarse red face, carroty locks, and big, stout figure for ten or twelve years back. But when she turned up again, an old, half-forgotten story was revived which fixed on her as Nick's mother.

Whether there were any real truth in this nobody knew; for Sarah did not claim Nick, and Nick indignantly refused to acknowledge Sarah. But there the story was, and, once revived, it was not allowed to die out.

Mrs. Ridley got hold of it, and used it as a whip of scorpions wherewith to goad her "servant lad" whenever he failed to please her. Teddy, between whom and Nick no love had ever been lost, in spite of the kind offices of the latter, delighted to taunt his more industrious companion with his supposed origin, calling him, "Sally's brat;" and poor Nick, to whom the drunken, red-faced woman was loathsome, writhed under these taunts, which stung him beyond endurance.

Those who have the happiness to come of a good stock which every one knows and respects, can have but little idea how handicapped is the man who does not possess this advantage. An honourable name not only reflects credit on its possessor, but is in itself an inheritance of virtue. If it is hard to do right even when a man is trained as a child in the way which he should go, and has the training of generations to keep him straight, how much harder must it be when he has had to tumble up as best he can, with that behind him which seems for ever trying to pull him downhill? For if *noblesse oblige*, is not the contrary, also, true, and is not evil an inheritance as well as good?

Poor Nick could not argue the matter out in words, but he felt that it was so. He wanted to do right and he tried to do it, but it was hard sometimes, in the teeth of these strong, mysterious passions which he felt within him, pulling the other way, more especially hard when it was evil that every one seemed to expect from him and not good.

"What can ye expect from a pig but a grunt? He's a fool that thinks to make a silk purse out o' a sow's lug, and what's to be looked for from Sarah's brat?"

It is, perhaps, natural that from an evil stock good fruit should not be expected, and yet, God be praised, it is not impossible, for, by grafting, even an evil stock may be reclaimed. But it is the cruelest injustice to taunt a fellow-creature with a defect which is no fault of his, and to blame him for a want which you take no pains to supply.

No wonder the boy felt the injustice, and that, feeling at the same time the growth of his young strength, his patience gave way at length, and he turned on his tormentors.

One fine day, when, after a worse rating than usual from Mrs. Ridley, Teddy followed him out among the ruins with the usual jibes, Nick suddenly flew at him like a tiger-cat, speedily got the better of his persecutor, and sent him howling to his mother with a black eye. Then, when, set on by his wife, the master had taken him sternly to task, Nick, his temper up, had answered back. A sound thrashing had been the consequence, and, full of resentment and fury, the boy had turned his back on Bellister and run away.

CHAPTER V.

TRAMPING SAL.

BELLISTER CASTLE was a Border stronghold in the days when moss-troopers and border-riders made excursions and incursions from Scotland to England, and *vice versâ*, to "lift" each other's cattle and harry each other's homesteads.

It must have been a strong place enough in those turbulent days, to judge by the thickness of the walls which still remain, and the vantage of its position.

It stands on a grassy hill, whose sides seem to have been "scarped," or cut away, so as to make them even more abrupt than nature intended. Perched on the top of this, the old grey tower commands a view up and down the valley of the South Tyne, both westward towards Carlisle and the Scottish border, and eastward towards Hexham and the wild region of North Tyne.

The first-mentioned river partly encloses the hill and adjoining fields in a silver semicircle, while behind the castle a belt of trees shelters it from the winds which rush down the narrow valley at whose head rises Cross Fell. The farm-buildings, which now share the hill with the ruins, have been partly formed out of the old walls, partly built up with the fallen stones, till they have become

part and parcel of the castle itself. House, barn, byres, and stable are all so neatly niched into the old fortress, whose grey keep rises in front of them, almost hiding them from view till you have mounted the hill and are quite close, that they hardly interfere with the picturesqueness of the place. A fine old plane-tree, with great spreading boughs, which grows under the castle wall, lends its leafy aid in screening off the modern additions and breaking up the old grey walls into picturesque masses of light and shade.

Nick and Meggie knew and loved every stone about the place. They knew where the owls built in the ivy, and where the tribe of chattering jackdaws lodged which had haunted the castle for generations. They had crept through a hole in the walls into a dungeon underground and found a rusty iron ring let into the foundations, to which many a poor Scot must have been chained in the good old times of long ago.

Meggie was fond of inventing stories about this dungeon and the ghost of the captive who, as she declared, still haunted it. When Nick had been sent to fetch in the cattle on dark nights, Meggie's story had more than once given him the shivers, and even the inventor of the story had ended in making herself believe that the moans of the wind, as, on stormy nights, it blew through the arrow-slits of the castle walls, were the moans of the poor languishing captive whom her own fancy had created.

Teddy Ridley never cared for such "make-believe," and scoffed at his sister's stories, which he was pleased to call "a parcel of lies." But Nick and Meggie minded little what Teddy said and thought, and were quite content to let him lie in the sun on the south side of the castle wall, while they told stories and played games out of earshot.

This and much else was associated in the mind of the wanderer with Bellister Castle, and, during his eighteen months of absence, the miseries of his sojourn there had been almost forgotten, pressed into the background of his mind by the vivid remembrance of its joys. Bellister was "home" to the homeless lad, and memory idealized it and made it appear to him what in actual experience it had never been.

The leaves of the great plane-tree, which had been green when he went away, had turned yellow for the second time, and were dropping down, like golden fans, over the old grey walls of the castle and the green hill on which it stood, as, one evening, a week after his return, Nick drove home the cows from the river-side pasture where they had been feeding during the day.

The old place looked very fair in the dying glow of the short November day, its broken walls and roofless tower rising darkly against a yellow sky, from whose clearness every twig and branch of the fast-thinning plane-tree detached itself in sharp black lines, as though drawn with pen and ink.

Viper was with him, walking sedately at his heels.

Indeed, the little terrier had attached herself so closely to Nick since his return that he was seldom seen without her. But Viper was not on duty. She was merely there for her own pleasure, and knew better than to interfere with Bounce, the black-and-white collie, whose business it was to bark behind the cows when they came in to be milked.

Nick was whistling. The boy's heart was glad in those days, for not only was he "at home" again, but the folks there had treated him with, what seemed to him, great consideration since his arrival. Viper and Meggie, now that he had had that little explanation with the latter which had soothed her hurt feelings, had been as friendly as ever. Mrs. Ridley and Teddy, seeing that "the master man" was bent on retaining a servant who was willing to serve without wages, had, since the evening of his arrival, refrained from attacking him; and Ridley himself had, hitherto, found nothing to blame. No wonder the boy whistled as he drove home the cows.

He was looking a very different creature from the ragged, footsore tramp who, only a week ago, had struggled up the same hill. At John Ridley's command, Mrs. Ridley had found for him an old checked suit of Teddy's, which, though shabby, and short in leg and sleeve for the long-limbed lad, was of good tweed, and looked infinitely more respectable than the rags. A contented heart, sound sleep, good food, and plenty of clean water

had done the rest of the work. And now, in spite of pock-marks, red hair, and plain features, no one could say that John Ridley's servant-lad looked otherwise than respectable. He was whistling still, as he drove the cows into the yard through the same gate against which he had leaned, a homeless outcast, only a week ago. He whistled more cheerily than ever as he tied them up in the byre, lit the lantern, and waited for Meggie to come out of the house and help him to milk.

She came speedily, one milking-pail on her thigh, the other swinging from her right hand.

"Here, lad," she said brightly, "take yer skeel, and let's to work. It's gone five o'clock."

"Ay, but it isn't *me* that's late, Meggie," he retorted merrily; "I was here first."

"Of course ye were," she returned, without a pause. "Ye wouldn't have *me* here afore the kye (cows)? Come, lad, we're nowther on us late. T' kitchen clock's swift, and she's only just gone five."

They settled themselves on their three-legged milking-stools by the side of adjoining cows, and soon the regular sound of alternate streams flowing sharply into the pails, sounded through the dim, warm byre. But this was not the only sound, nor yet the "*munch, munch*" of the cows, making their supper off the fragrant hay, with which each stall was supplied. These were but the accompaniments of the gay chatter of young voices which went on with almost as little pause as the milking itself.

Nick and Meggie thoroughly enjoyed the milking-hour, morning and evening. Since Nick's return, Teddy no longer helped on these occasions, and they had the byre all to themselves. Nowadays, there was but little time besides when they were able to be together, for Mrs. Ridley generally managed to want Meggie during the odd half-hours when Nick was disengaged, and the old free intercourse among the ruins was almost at an end.

Nick, indeed, considered himself too big to play at hide-and-seek any longer, and had quite ceased to believe in the captive. And, though Meggie would willingly have begun again just where they left off, such a renewal of bygone days is seldom possible.

The two young things made the best of the opportunities that remained to them, however, and of these the milking-hour was one of the happiest and least untrammelled.

As the lad and lass settled themselves on their milking-stools, little Viper rolled herself round in the nest of hay which bore the long-standing impress of her little body in the last stall by the door. This stall was vacant, and here the terrier had lain every day, during the morning and evening milking-hour, since Nick came back. She considered herself on duty now, and always gave the alarm when any one besides the milkers entered the byre. For Bounce, the cows once in, invariably retired to the kitchen, told Meggie, with a wag of the tail, that her services were required, and then lay down

under the table. For dogs have their regular hours for rest and duty as well as their masters and mistresses.

"What would you do if you were rich, Nick?" asked Meggie, during the course of the evening conversation.

Nick paused a moment in his work, and scratched his thick red thatch, which stood out in flaming contrast against the black side of the cow which he was milking.

"What would you do, Nick?" repeated the girl.

"I diven't ken," he answered, in a sorely puzzled voice. "Ye see, I niver *was* rich, Meggie, and I ken nowt aboot t' ways of rich folk. Mebbe—well, mebbe I'd buy ye some bullets and get a new Sunday suit."

"A body needn't be sae *vara* rich to dae that."

"No? Well, mebbe not. I could dae that when I was hired, and they didn't give me over-much brass, didn't the folks there. I thought, whiles, aboot that Sunday suit, but I niver bought it. What was t' use when I niver got nae liberty, week-days or Sundays owther? It was a hard place that, Meggie."

"Was it? Harder nor this, Nick?"

"Oh, a vast! At least," the boy added, after a moment of thought, "there was, mebbe, not sae mickle mair *work*, but there was naebody to give a chap a kind word, and niver a moment off t' spot. Eh, lass, but it was dull!"

"But ye got paid; that was something."

"Ay, I got paid. But where was t' odds? I

A FACE WAS VISIBLE, LOOKING INTO THE BYRE THROUGH THE PARTIALLY OPEN DOOR. *Page* 49.

could nowther go and spend t' brass, nor was there aught I cared to spend it on."

"And what did ye dae wi't?"

"Oh, when I got wi' them tramps it *went*."

"But how?"

"How?" The boy scratched his head again, at a loss how to satisfy his questioner on a point so mysterious. "Well, lass, I diven't joost ken," he said at last. "It went—*somehow*."

"And how much wage did ye get, Nick?"

"Six pund the half year. They——"

There was a sudden "*Wuff!*" from the stall where Viper was lying, and before Nick could complete his sentence the terrier had leaped up and was barking furiously before the door. The boy and girl stopped milking and rose to their feet, turning their eyes, at the same time, towards the door, which had been partly opened.

It had grown dark while the milking was in progress, so that even the dim light within the byre looked bright in contrast to the blackness outside.

Against this dark background, and full in the rays of the lantern which hung near the door, a face was visible, looking into the byre through the partially open door. It was a coarse, red face, with bloated lips and bleared eyes, framed in grizzled red hair, which a rusty-black bonnet did but little to keep in order.

Nick's heart leaped up, and then suddenly sank, as he felt, into his shoes. He turned cold and

then hot. For he remembered that face far too well. It was the face of his bugbear, "Tramping Sal."

He did not need Meggie's exclamation to tell him this. But the name which came so glibly to her lips refused to pass his.

"Why, it's Sally the Tramp!" said Meggie. "Whisht, Viper, cannot ye?"

"Ay, carl off yer dorg," cried the harsh, rough voice the boy knew so well. "Down, ye vixen ye! Wad ye bite me, then? Carl it off, I say!"

Nick stepped forward and made a sign to the dog, and she came to him immediately, only continuing to show her displeasure by low, underground growls.

"What! it's *really* Nick come back, is it?" asked the woman, coming a few steps further into the byre. "I was hearin' sae, and I thowt I'd step up and find out for certain. I heard yer voices in here, and cam' this way instead o' troublin' t' hoose. Mistress Ridley's, whiles, hardlys mair friendly nor her dorg."

The woman laughed as she said this, and her laugh was even more disagreeable than her voice.

"What is't ye're wantin', Sally?" asked Meggie, seeing that Nick stood still and did not speak. "A bit bread, eh?"

The woman laughed scornfully.

"When a widdie woman has a lad, like yon, earnin' a good wage, it isn't fit that she should go on beggin' frae door to door," she said. "A bit

bread? Nay, I maun hae mair nor that. Come, lad, fork out!"

"But I've nae brass," gasped poor Nick, with hanging head.

The sight of this woman and her demand seemed utterly to have taken all spirit out of him. He did not seem able to repulse the claim of relationship, which, when he was a child, she had never acknowledged.

"Come now, I like that!" retorted the rough, coarse voice. "But it's nae use pretendin', lad, when I heard ye say as I come in, that ye were gettin' sax pund t' half year."

"But that was in his last place," said Meggie, speaking up for her companion. "Faither's givin' him nowt here."

"Nowt! Tell that to t' horse-marines!" scoffed Tramping Sally. "Divn't tell *me*, lass, that a lusty lad, like yon, will sarve ony man for nowt. 'Tisn't likely. Nay, nay, it's nae use owther on ye tryin' to take *me* in. Trampin Sally wasn't born yesterday, no, nor yet t' day afore, my bairns."

"But it's quite true. I hevn't ony brass, no, not even a copper," burst out Nick, desperately.

"Not to give yer *moother*, ye mean!" retorted Sarah. "Shame on ye for an onnatural bairn, Nick! shame on ye, I say!"

Nick clasped his hands till the nails ran into his flesh, behind the shelter of the black cow, where he had again retired. To hear this wretched creature call herself his mother was more than he

could endure. He had got back to Bellister, and had been so happy there this last week. Since that first evening no one had taunted him with his origin, so that he himself was even beginning to forget that there was such a person as Sally the Tramp. But now here she was again, and his torment would begin once more!

If only he had kept some of those wages he had cared for so little at the time, that he might have bribed her to go before any one in the house found out that she had come! If only he could get rid of her without the others knowing, he felt sure that Meggie would not betray him! But there seemed no hope of that, for he had not a penny in the world.

While these thoughts were pressing through his tortured brain, Meggie spoke again.

"Will a sixpence do, Sally?"

The woman looked at her as though weighing her words, and trying to find out how much more might be extracted.

"A shullin' might," she said presently.

"And would ye gan reet awa' if ye got that?" asked the little maid, with all her father's caution in making a bargain.

"Ay, I wouldn't carl again till t' next time," was the equally cautious answer.

"And how long would it be afore that?"

"I could, mebbe, mak' it dae for a day or twae," replied Sally.

"Then ye winnot get it," was the prompt

rejoinder. "If ye want the shullin' it must last a month at least."

"Hoots! Who can live on a shullin' a month?" asked Sally, scornfully. "Even t' Union allows more nor that when a body gets outdoor relief, which is what they refuse to *me*, pier widdie woman though I am!" The sentence ended in the true professional whine.

"That lad ought to keep me arltogether instead o' puttin' me off wi' a beggarly shullin'," she went on, after a pause, pointing reproachfully towards Nick.

"Ye'll get nowt out o' him," answered Meggie, stoutly; "he's only just keepin' hissel'. Will ye tak' t' shullin' and mak' the promise, Sally? If not, ye'll joost have to gan without, for mother'll give ye nowt. I heard her say sae, last time ye cam'."

Sally used some bad language concerning Mrs. Ridley, which may as well be left out; but, having thus relieved herself, she came to terms.

"Weel, weel," she said at last, with a windy sigh, perceiving that Ridley's little daughter was no more to be bullied into compliance than was Ridley himself, "it's a pitiful dole, it is that, but it's, mebbe, better nor nowt. I'll joost tak't."

"And promise?"

"Fly awa' wi' t' lass! She's her faither's ain dowter!" exclaimed Sally with irritation "Ay, I promise, since needs must."

"Very well. Wait till I come back."

Meggie went off to her private hoard, leaving Nick and Sally alone together.

The woman said a good deal during the interval —complaining, wheedling, threatening. The boy said nothing. He stood behind his sheltering cow, weathering the storm as best he could, wincing sorely sometimes, but giving no sign.

It seemed ages before Meggie was back.

"There tak' 't, and be off!" she said sharply, handing a bright new shilling to the tramp, who clutched it greedily and went.

CHAPTER VI.

NAEBODY'S BAIRN.

WHEN she was gone neither Meggie nor Nick said a word to each other till the milking was over, which was not till rather late, that evening, on account of the interruption.

Nick did not seem able to open his mouth, and Meggie, fearing that he might feel himself under an obligation to her on account of the shilling, would not allude to the occasion of her small service.

She guessed, moreover, that her companion must be ill-pleased at Sally's claim, knowing him to be sore on the subject of the supposed relationship. But even Meggie did not guess how terribly sore the boy was, or how much he feared a renewal of the old persecution concerning her.

When the last cow was stripped, however, and the girl was carefully carrying her brimming vessel towards the door, Nick came behind her, took it from her hand, and set it down.

His face was very red, and he seemed as though he wanted to say something, but could neither find voice nor words. At last he blurted out—

"Meggie, lass, ye winna let on?"

The girl looked at him in some surprise.

"Aboot t' shullin'? Nay, Nick, ye needn't be flayed (afraid); it was my own."

"Aboot—aboot Sally, I mean."

The name seemed to stick in his throat.

"I winnot say a word!" was the vehement answer.

Still the boy detained her. He seemed to have something else on his mind. His face turned positively scarlet, and he breathed hard.

"What is't, lad?" asked the girl at length, seeing he did not speak.

"Meggie—oh, Meggie," he said at last, with a painful effort, "dost think she *really* is what folks say—my—my moother?" The word came out low and smothered.

"Well, I diven't ken, nae mair nor ye do, lad. But, there, what does it matter?" she added, touched by his evident distress and anxious to comfort him. "As lang as she keeps away, it needn't mak' a happ'orth o' odds!"

"But it *does*. Wouldst like to have her for *thy* moother, Meggie?"

"*My* moother? Trampin' Sal? Nay, but I wadn't!" the answer came with an honest vehemence that was unmistakable.

"Then why should I hev her for mine?"

But Meggie could not answer this question.

"Well, but mebbe she *isn't*," was all she could find to say. "Come, lad, ye munnot tak' on that gait."

For the boy's features were working, and in spite of his sixteen years he had to wink very hard to keep back the springing tears of shame and anger.

"What gars t' folk say she is? And what gar'd *her* to claim me joost now?" he asked at last. "Was it *she* that brought me to t' Hoose when I was a babby?"

"Nay, but she didn't. I ken *that* onyhow, for I've heard faither say sae," answered Meggie, quickly, delighted to be able to tell him something definite on a subject so mysterious. "Ye were found lying by t' waterside, joost for arl t' world as we found Viper. I thought ye kent that?"

"Nay, I didn't."

He looked a little relieved.

At that moment a voice was heard calling, "Meggie! Meggie! What's got t' lass?"

"There's moother; I maun gan," said the girl, hastily taking up her milking-pail. "Come, Nick, she's waitin' on t' milk."

Mrs. Ridley was not one to wait patiently at any time, and both Meggie and Nick heard a good

deal about the delay, as they handed in the milk at the dairy door. But Nick did not seem to notice her reproofs. His mind was too full of something yet more stinging. Returning to the byre to put out the lantern and shut the cows up for the night, he was forced to notice little Viper, who had followed close at his heels and was doing her utmost to attract his attention.

He sat down in the empty stall, took her between his knees, and examined her attentively. Viper was not a pretty dog, nor did she show any of those signs of good breeding which count for more than mere beauty in the eyes of dog-fanciers.

To what breed she belonged it would be impossible to say. She was neither a Dandie Dinmont, nor an Aberdeen, nor a Bedlington, nor, yet, an Airedale. None of the respectable terrier families on either side of the Border would have had anything to say to such a nondescript specimen as she was, though, probably, she might have claimed kinship with them all.

No, Viper had neither beauty nor breeding. She was merely a little, rough, sandy-haired creature, with a tail like a frayed rope, brown prick ears, a good deal torn in the wars, and a vixenish nose. Her one good point was her eyes, and no well-bred terrier could have possessed a pair more capable of expressing the feelings of the loyal little heart. Brown, liquid eyes they were, and as full of love and sympathy as those of a human being. Nay, many a human being might have been proud to

possess such a pair of speaking eyes as belonged to this little mongrel terrier.

Those who found her had called her "Viper," though *why*, would be hard to say, for any living creature less like that venomous and proverbially ungrateful and treacherous reptile could not have been found.

Poor Viper was one of those unfortunate beings called "a dog with a bad name," a name which she did not merit.

As Nick finished his examination, he met the look of love and sympathy in the creature's eyes, and his own filled.

"Mebbe *thoo* kens, Viper," he whispered huskily—"thoo kens how bad it feels to be naebody's bairn? We were found t' same way, and we were named in t' same fashion. Thoo's Viper and I'se Nick—'Auld Nick' they'll ca' me some day, mebbe! And yet nowther on us is *that* bad, are we, Viper? Eh, lass, lass, but it's hard to bide!"

His head sank on the dog's rough head, and the scalding tears, which he had kept back in Meggie's presence, broke forth unchecked, and fell fast and thick among her sandy hair.

The creature seemed well aware that her friend was in trouble. With a low whine she put out a pink tongue and licked away the tears as they fell.

The dog's dumb sympathy did for the boy's sore heart what, perhaps, no human sympathy could have done. For, instead of feeling obliged to check

his tears in the presence of this silent companion, he let them have their way, and the relief was very great.

"Eh, well, Viper," he said at last, raising his head and caressing the terrier in return, "it's nae use frettin'. We maun just try and mak' t' best on't, little lass, must you and me. We're baith in t' same boat!"

They were, indeed. But, at the same time, a boy feels what a dog does not.

Console himself as he might by fancying them similar, Nick was well aware that there was a difference between his lot and that of his canine companion. For, while Viper cared not a jot whence she had sprung, nor what she was called, Nick was almost as sensitive on the one point as the other. The thoughtlessness of those around him had made even the one name that he possessed unpleasant to its owner. For though they had not begun to call him "Auld Nick" yet, an allusion to his supposed godfather was one of Teddy's favourite ways of "getting a rise," as he called it, out of the friendless lad. As a baby he had been "fractious" and troublesome, getting into all the mischief of which year-old babies are capable. The woman who had had charge of him in the workhouse had angrily called him "a limb," and this had, presently, slid into "Nick." When he came to be christened, the clergyman, ignorant of the origin of the child's name, naturally supposed it to be short for Nicholas, and baptized him accordingly. But that was the

first and only time that the longer name had been applied to the little waif.

As "Nick" he had been known before his baptism, and "Nick" he continued to be called ever after. "What's in a name?" we may ask with Shakespeare; but, nevertheless, there are few of us who could truly answer "Nothing." A name is a sort of label which, once applied to any one, be he dog or man, is apt to stick very fast, and if a good name is a precious possession, a bad one is a possession of another sort, and hard to get rid of, however little we may desire to keep it.

"We're baith in t' same boat," said Nick to Viper in a would-be cheerful tone; nevertheless a sigh followed, and the sigh said more than the words.

CHAPTER VII.

BLACKMAIL.

TRAMPING SAL kept her word, and did not turn up again at Bellister for a whole month. Nay, a full month went by, and another began, and still she did not appear.

But the day of her first visit was the last day of poor Nick's peace of mind. He was always dreading her return, and fearing that, next time, her visit might be of a less private nature.

It was bad enough to receive her after dark, alone in the byre with Meggie. What would it be should she elect to come in the daytime, and pay her call at the kitchen door, when, say, all the family were assembled at breakfast or dinner? The boy's cheeks flamed as he pictured the scene, and thought over all that might be said. He racked his brains in vain to think of some means by which his reputed parent might be induced to remain at a distance, but rack his brains as he might, no happy thought would come to his aid. There was one means, and one only, so far as Nick could see, by which Sally might be kept away, and that was money. If Meggie's shilling had done this once, then, surely, if only he could raise the wherewithal, the same means would have the same effect in perpetuity. But where was the money to be found? He received no wages at Bellister, and his employment there prevented him earning anything from another quarter. He had not a penny to give, let alone a shilling. Nor had Meggie another in her hoard, just then, even if Nick could have made up his mind to ask for it; and this he was loth to do, though he knew that she would willingly have given it.

It is true that the boy had never so much as thanked his friend for her accommodation. But this was not because he was ungrateful for what she had done. On the contrary, he felt the little girl's generous kindness even too much. There are certain persons who feel that for certain services mere formal thanks are less than insufficient. To

say a careless "thank you" in such cases is like throwing a halfpenny to a man who has saved you from walking over a precipice. It can in nowise reward him for what he has done, and is worse than giving him nothing.

But though he did not thank her, the friendless boy saved up the memory of every little kindness in his heart, to be repaid with interest if ever the chance should come. Meantime, the question troubled him greatly, to the exclusion of every other thought: "Where was the money to come from to buy off Tramping Sarah?" She might be expected to turn up any day now, and unless he had money ready for her, there was sure to be such a scene as he dreaded to think of.

Now, of course, people of any experience knew that the system of buying off, or blackmail, as it is called, is about the worst that can be tried. If any one threatens to do you an ill-turn, it is better to brave it out, let them do their worst, and have it over at once. For, once give them money to let you alone, and they will want more and more, till, finally, when you have no more to give, you will be in exactly the same position, if not a worse one, than you were at first. But poor Nick was not experienced, and, like many another in his case, blackmail appeared to him as his only means of salvation. After a great deal of consideration, he made up his mind to ask his master for extra work and a small monthly payment Nothing but the extreme fear and anxiety in which he was

living could have nerved the boy to make such a request, for he knew Ridley too well to flatter himself that the demand would be welcome.

John Ridley, indeed, was less easy to do with even than usual, at that time.

His appointment as viewer to the neighbouring colliery had been unacceptable from the first; for his character as "a hard man" was well established, and the men had had no reason to change their opinion of him now that he was set over them.

There had been a good deal of grumbling, and even some attempt at insubordination, which had had to be put down with a high hand. And now, though the men were reduced to order, and Ridley, warned by what had taken place, gave less outward cause for offence, he knew that the feeling against him was unchanged, and vented at home the resentment which he dared not show in public.

It was one afternoon, when they were looking at the stock together, with a view to the Christmas sales, that Nick, with a great deal of inward tremor, ventured to make his request.

"Maister," he said, when Ridley, pleased with the improvement in the beasts since his new "servant lad" had had the charge of them, had given him a word of grudging commendation—"maister, I've been thinkin'——"

"Weel, lad?"

Ridley said the words so sharply and turned with such a sudden movement from the cattle to fix his keen eyes upon his servant, that Nick's heart

gave a frightened leap, and his breath seemed all to go away. He stood silent, twisting his shabby cap in his hands.

"Weel, what is't?" repeated Ridley, with a show of impatience which was by no means encouraging. "I've got ither things to dae than to stand here waitin' of ye to find yer tongue. If ye've got onything to say, out wi't."

Ridley naturally was expecting a complaint, and the expectation did not make him the pleasanter.

"I was wantin' to ax ye—ye see, I get nowt but clothes and keep, and——"

"Ye're wantin' a wage? Then what for did ye come to Bellister? Didn't I tell ye I'd only take ye back on the old terms? My word, after the way ye served us, ye might have been thankful to get back at all!"

Ridley's face was red and his voice loud, for in his inmost conscience he knew that in this matter the boy might justly complain against him.

"'Tisn't that," said Nick, hastily, putting up one hand as though to ward off a blow. "I was glad enough to be back on ony terms, ye ken that, maister. It's nobbut——"

"There, lad, cannot ye speak oot? If ye've a complaint to mak', mak' it. Is it the mistress that's been hard on ye, or Teddy? Come, ye needn't be feared to say. I'll mak' it reet for ye, if that's arl."

Thus encouraged, Nick made his request.

"I've nowt to complain on," he said, a little less nervously. "What I was wishin' to ax ye was,

wad ye give me an odd job at the colliery, whiles, for which I could earn a bit brass? There's times when I could spare an half hour when work here's done."

"If ye haven't sufficient to fill up yer time here, my lad, it isn't for want of turns that want doin' aboot t' place," returned Ridley, stiffly. "There's always harness to clean, or bits to brighten, it seems to me. Nay, nay, keep to yer ain jobs and don't be hankering after ither folk's wark. It's quite enough havin' Teddy potterin' back'ards and for'ards between this and t' pits wi'out ye. When it comes to workin' in two spots, when work isn't done at *yan*, there's aye the excuse o' t' *ither*, and the end on't is *baith* are neglected. Nay, nay, my lad, stick to the farm."

Nick's face fell sadly. He still stood irresolute, twisting his cap in his hands. Had it not been for the fear of Tramping Sal, he must have been utterly discouraged and given up the business as hopeless. But the thought of Sarah held him back.

"Not even an odd job, whiles?" he asked, as Ridley stopped.

"Nay, haven't I *said* sae already?" rejoined the master, impatiently. "Why, whativer dae ye want wi' brass, Nick?" he asked presently. "Ye've yer meat and yer clothes and a good roof over yer head. What more can ye want?"

"Ay, but a chap wants a copper in his pocket, whiles," persisted the boy, growing very red, and looking down shamefacedly at the cap in his hands.

Ridley meditated a moment. He reflected that to be penny-wise is often to be pound-foolish, and to deny the boy a little pocket-money might mean the loss of a servant gratis. He put his hand into his own pocket, felt amongst the coins carefully, discriminated between a half-crown and a two-shilling bit, and pulled out the latter. Had there chanced to be a single shilling with the rest, the chances are that he would have chosen it instead.

"Here, my lad," he said grandly, holding the silver piece towards Nick. "If it's nobbut a bit pocket-money ye want, to buy bullets and sich-like, I'm not the man to deny ye. Take it as a Christmas-box, my lad. Nay, nay, ye needn't thank me, it's nobbut yance in a way, ye ken."

He added this hastily, fearing suddenly, as he watched the delight in the boy's face, and saw how he grabbed the coin, that this taste of wealth might but make him eager for more.

As for Nick he did not omit the thanks, this time, as he had done in Meggie's case ; but his sense of gratitude was the smaller in proportion. For the boy was not wanting in shrewdness, and had wit enough to perceive that he had a certain right to the gift which had been so grudgingly bestowed. Two shillings! He stood looking at the coin, after Ridley had left him, moving it about in his hand that he might watch the silvery sparkles flash out from Her Majesty's countenance as it caught the slanting rays of the wintry sun. Two shillings! That meant for him, not bullets or marbles, as

Ridley supposed, judging naturally by what it would mean for other lads of his age, but two months' freedom from Tramping Sally.

How the coin glittered and sparkled! The smile broadened on Nick's plain face as he watched it, playing with it in almost childish glee.

For the moment he forgot to be disappointed that his request had been refused. Even the knowledge that the gift he had received was not likely to be soon repeated had no present power to damp him. He held in his hand a talisman which would banish the disturber of his peace. It was his at once without having to wait for it, as would have been the case if John Ridley had promised him the jobs he had asked for. This was enough for Nick just then.

He tossed the florin into the air, and watched it spin in the sunshine, like a child with a new plaything. For the moment, his heart was light as a child's indeed, and the shadow which had made his young life dark had passed into the background.

But it was only for the moment. A very real shadow fell upon the turf in front of him, and, turning quickly round at the sight of it, he found himself face to face with the person he most dreaded in the world.

Tramping Sally's face looked redder than ever in the crimson glow of the westering sun. Her rusty bonnet was awry, and her grizzled, carroty locks were all on end. It did not need her

uncertain gait to tell Nick that she had been drinking.

Quickly he slipped the florin into his pocket. But he was too late. The greedy look in the woman's bleared eyes showed plainly that she had seen it.

"Well, my darlin', and how are ye to-day?" she asked, in the harsh, rough tones that belong to the woman who has spurned all the graces and virtues of her sex. "You'll be thinkin' it long since yer mother paid ye a visit, eh, my jewel?"

At the sight of the woman's face and the sound of her wheedling speech, Nick's heart sank. The little spring of happiness which had welled out of its dry soil vanished again as suddenly as it had come.

"Why d'ye carl yerself my moother?" he asked desperately.

"Weel, disn't all the folks say I am?" answered Sarah, cunningly answering the question by putting another.

"But are you?"

The boy's lips were dry as he put the question, and he looked eagerly into the woman's red face, as though he would tear the truth from her and know the worst at once.

"What arl t' world sez *maun* be true."

Nick uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Come, my honey, ye've nae carl to be 'shamed o' yer ain moother," went on Sarah, coming nearer, and laying a coarse, grimy hand upon the boy's sleeve. "I'm a pier widdie woman, it's true; but

what's that? There's a deal worse folks in the world nor Trampin' Sal. 'Tisn't *ma* fault if I's badly off, and hez to come to my ain good son for a bit help, whiles. I've kep' awa' frae ye mair nor a month now; but winter's comin' on, and ye wadn't have yer auld moother starve, now, wad ye, honey?"

"I'll give ye a shillin' to stop away till the end of January," said Nick, trying to speak sternly. "But ye maun stop here amang t' ruins till I get it. There's nae carl to let onybody see you."

"And why should I hide oot o' sight?" asked Sarah, angrily. "*I've* nae carl to be 'shamed o' mysel', whativer ye may be o' me, ye onnatural bairn ye! And, as for takin' a shullin' to bide awa' frae my ain son for six whole weeks, I'm not sae mean as to stoop to 't, not I."

"A month then?" said Nick, beginning to tremble.

"Nor a month nowther! Ye needn't pretend to go for yer brass, and then give me the slip, if *that's* yer little game, my callant. Trampin' Sally knows a trick worth twae o' that."

Saying this, the woman plumped herself down on some fallen stones under the castle wall, and folded her arms across her chest.

Nick looked at her helplessly. What was he to do? He had nothing with him but the two-shilling piece, and to give it to her all at once seemed a wastry too great to contemplate.

"But I haven't a shullin' in my pocket," he

said at last. "Ye'll have to wait till I go and get one."

He was turning to go, when Sally jumped up again, and caught him roughly by the arm.

"Now then, no nonsense," she said as roughly. "If ye haven't a shullin' wi' ye, ye've got *twae*, which is a deal better. Nay, ye needn't try to deceive me, for I saw ye tossin' it up, as I came up t' bank ahint ye. So gie it up at yance, my lad, and have done wi' t' matter."

"Then ye'll come here nae mair for twae months?"

"'Deed, and I'll promise nae sich thing! What for sud I deny myself t' pleasure o' lookin' on yer bonnie face arl that time, my jewel?" returned Sally, with a leer.

The boy turned sick with disgust and despair. Feeling, as he did, he could not make the bold fight that Meggie had done a month before. The personal interest he felt in the matter was too strong to allow him to appear indifferent as to the result, and nothing else could have served him in such a struggle as the present. He made the fatal mistake of asking his adversary for terms.

"Hoo long, then?" he asked feebly, anxious only to get quit of his visitor before she was seen, by any means, however disadvantageous to himself.

"I canna say," was the cool answer. "It'll depend on hoo lang it is afore my mootherly heart begins to yearn for a sight o' you, my darlin'. Come, gie me t' brass, or I'll tak' yer arm, and

we'll step across together and drop in on Mistress Ridley. It'll be aboot tea-time, I should think."

The insolent coolness of this speech was a masterpiece in its way. It quite got the better of poor Nick. He capitulated at discretion. Pulling out the florin, he almost threw it in Sally's face.

But she caught it neatly, dropped him a mocking curtsey, and walked off down the hill.

Hardly was she gone, and poor Nick was still standing looking after her, feeling as though he were turned to stone, when a mocking laugh rang out behind him from the ruins, and Teddy's handsome face showed itself from one of the loopholes.

"Hullo!" shouted Teddy. "How's yer moother, this evenin', Nick? Ye'll be glad to see her again, I reckon, after the long time ye've been parted. Did she ken ye again for her ain bairn, eh?"

So the blow had fallen at last in spite of all that he could do to avert it. The knowledge of this made Nick tremble, while a feeling of helpless rage caused his blood to boil.

Mad with indignation, he rushed into the ruins in pursuit of his tormentor. But Teddy was nowhere to be seen. Presently, however, another mocking laugh sounded above his head, and he caught sight of the black-haired boy perched up in the embrasure of one of the windows which slit the castle wall.

To swing himself up by the ivy was the work of an instant, but, when he reached the ledge, Teddy was running along the top of the wall, laughing as

he went. For full five minutes this game went on, in deadly earnest on Nick's part, in laughing mockery so far as Teddy was concerned ; and when at last the former had succeeded in catching the latter, and was about to have his revenge, a stern voice called on the lads to desist.

"Now then," said John Ridley, appearing suddenly before the combatants—"now then, what's to do? Haven't I told ye both I'll have nae fightin'? It was along o' that we parted last time, Nick ; and as for you, Teddy, if ye've been up to yer old games, the sooner ye learn to keep a civil tongue in yer head the better. Now then, march! Tea's waitin'."

"It was nobbut a bit of play, faither," panted Teddy, struggling again into the jacket which had been almost pulled off his back. "Nobbut a bit play, eh, Nick?"

But Nick answered nothing. All tea-time he sat on thorns, dreading what Teddy might say. But, though the boy whenever his father's eye was off him, grinned maliciously at his neighbour, he made no allusion to Tramping Sal.

CHAPTER VIII.

BOGLES.

CHRISTMAS passed, and the New Year, and Teddy, though, at times, when they were alone together, he made his companion smart with a barbed word, said nothing openly concerning the meeting he had witnessed between Nick and his so-called mother. As the two boys were but little in each other's society, Teddy having almost ceased to do any work on the farm since the arrival of Nick, the latter suffered much less from the discovery than he had expected. He began to hope, as time passed, and Teddy said nothing of the money transaction which had taken place, that this, at least, was still a secret.

Often and often he asked himself, "How much of the conversation between himself and Sarah had Teddy overheard?" But as he could never bring himself to put this question to the only person who could answer it, there was but little satisfaction to be had.

He was, however, inclined to believe that the black-haired boy had not arrived on the scene till Sarah was going; and, if this were the case, it was just possible that he had only guessed that the woman's figure going down the hill in the twilight —for the sun had set during the interview—was Sally's.

If this were so, the matter was not so bad as he had at first feared, and if only the tramp could be kept out of sight for the future, it might reasonably be hoped that Teddy would forget.

But Nick had no more money, so that, if she came again, he felt that he would be at her mercy.

A boy, however, is always a hopeful being; and, at sixteen, to be out of sight is apt to be out of mind. Therefore, as the days went by, and Tramping Sal did not reappear, Nick's fears gradually subsided, and the future tormented him less.

Thus matters stood, when, one evening, towards the middle of January, as Nick and Meggie rose from milking, they suddenly missed Viper.

She was not in her usual place in the empty stall by the byre door. She was not in the byre at all. She was not even in the yard. Nick called and whistled in vain. She was nowhere to be found. The thing was unusual, for Viper was not one of those independent characters to be found amongst dogs as well as human beings, who have frequently concerns on hand which take them, no one knows where. If such characters as these are missing for a while, their absence causes no anxiety. But when the companionable, sociable souls withdraw into private life, every one begins to dread that something serious must be the matter.

It was an almost unheard-of thing for Viper to stay for more than a very few minutes away from Nick. She was like his shadow, and could not even sleep quietly at nights unless her friend was by her

side. The Ridleys had been forced to let her leave the cart-shed since Nick came, so piteously did she howl to be with him ; and even Mrs. Ridley, for the sake of peace and quietness, was obliged to wink at the fact that the terrier crept up nightly to the "servant-lad's" loft over the stable, and lay at the foot of his bed.

The milkers remembered to have seen Viper before they sat down to milk. She had followed them into the byre as usual, and curled herself up in her accustomed place. Where, then, could she have got to?

Presently, Meggie remembered that Teddy had looked into the byre while the milking was going on, and had gone away, leaving the door open behind him, which, after a while, finding the wind blew in, she had risen to shut. Viper, she thought, must have followed her brother. But this, also, was unusual, for Viper had no great love for Teddy.

After taking the milk to the dairy, and making all right in the byre for the night, the milkers continued their search for the terrier.

Teddy was reading the paper on the kitchen settle, but the dog was not with him, nor could he give any information concerning her.

Nick went again into the yard and whistled. It was a stormy night. The wind, which had been rising since sundown, blew in chilly gusts round the buildings. Showers of sleet were beginning to wing their way across the moorland, which lay to the north, and to whiten the hill on which the castle

stood. Meggie stood outside the back kitchen door, her white pinafore blowing about in the wind.

"Viper! Viper! Viper!" she called, her clear young voice trying to outshriek the rising gale.

"Hark!" she said to Nick, after a pause for listening had succeeded to the chorus of whistles and calls. "I believe I heard her barkin' amang t' ruins. Mebbe it's a cat."

"Ay, that may be sae," answered the boy. "A strange cat might tempt her. I'll awa' and see."

"I'll come and arl," said Meggie, hastily. "Wait on me while I get a plaid."

She seized on the first that came, and then the boy and girl, holding each other's hands, went round the corner of the house and passed into the ruins.

"We'd better have brought t' lantern," remarked Meggie, presently, as they stumbled along in the dark. "It's pitch black in here. I diven't just like 't, Nick," she went on, pressing more closely to the boy's side.

"Hoots, lass!" exclaimed her companion, rather contemptuously; "what's there to be flayed on? If Viper's here, she'll come tiv us, sure enough. Hey, Viper, Viper! Where are ye, lass?"

A sharp bark sounded in reply round a corner of the keep; but the dog made no such haste to join them as Nick had expected.

"Ay, it'll be a cat," he said, moving off in the direction of the sound, closely accompanied by Meggie. "She's good at cats, is Viper."

It was indeed dark inside the walls of the old keep. The wind howled dismally through the loop-holes and through the empty windows, swelling to a hurricane, and then dying away for an instant into a low moan, only to rise again and roar the louder.

The two young people knew their way too well to stumble, otherwise they must certainly have tripped among the heaps of fallen masonry which littered the ground. For Bellister was not a show ruin, and where, from time to time, parts of the walls fell down, there, unless they interfered with the farm-buildings, they were generally allowed to lie.

Presently Meggie came to a sudden stand, and clutched her companion by the arm.

"Hark! What's that, Nick?" she said, in a trembling voice. "I'm sure I heard a groan."

The boy laughed derisively.

"It's nobbut t' wind," he said.

"Nay, *that* wasn't the wind," was the awed reply. "I'm certain I heard somebody groan. Hark! There it is again! Oh, Nick, do stop—I'm *that* frightened!"

"It's, mebbe, the captive," returned the boy, trying to laugh his companion out of her fears. "D'ye mind (remember) the captive, Meggie? Ye aye said he was chained up under this tower, ye ken."

"Dinnot, Nick, dinnot!" cried the girl, in a terrified voice. "If it's—it's *him*, let us cut and run. Do come along back into t' hoose. I'm trem'ling arl over!"

This was true. Nick felt her shudders, as she clung to his arm, and heard her teeth chattering in the darkness.

"Well, *you* go in," he said shortly, with a boy's want of sympathy with the fears of a girl. "I maun see what it is, onyhow."

"Nay, I winnot go alone—I *durstn't!*" was the frightened answer. "Oh, Nick, why didn't we bring a light?"

"Whisht, lass!" he cried hastily; "there *is* something there, I dae believe! It's, mebbe, the cat, but she's makin' a queer-like noise, if it is. Here, Viper! Viper! good dog!"

But Viper only barked again. She evidently wanted her friends to go to her instead of going to them.

"She's close by now," whispered Nick in his companion's ear. "Just by t' hole that leads down to the dungeon."

"Then it's—it's t' bogle (ghost) she's after!" Meggie answered back, in a voice thick with terror. "Oh, Nick, Nick, dinna gan ony nearer, for pity's sake!"

But Nick's curiosity was stronger than his fears, though by now it cannot be denied that even his heart was beating more quickly than was normal. He moved forward in the direction of Viper's bark, and Meggie, preferring to meet a spectre in company than to fly from it alone, went with him, holding on by his arm.

When the two came close to the entrance to the

dungeon, there was a sound of something moving about among the briars and nettles which grew thickly around; and presently the terrier came to their feet, and began to whine and fawn upon them, licking Nick's hand as though rejoiced that he had come.

Nick spoke to and caressed the dog, then, following her lead, he stooped down and felt with his hand amongst the dead stalks of the nettles.

"I say, Meggie," he cried presently, "there's a piece of wall fallen down here since this afternoon. It's the wind that'll have done it. Stand back, lass! There'll, mebbe, be more to come. If——"

He broke off suddenly, as an unmistakable moan came to his ears.

"Eh, Meggie," he said, after a hurried investigation, and this time his voice was hardly more steady than the girl's, "there's a *body* here under t' stanes! Let's run for t' lantern!"

Trembling with mingled awe and excitement, the boy and girl took each other by the hand, and, without another word, made the best of their way out of the ruins.

"Let's go to the hoose for moother and Teddy," panted the girl, as she and her companion reached the farmyard. "I wish father hadn't gone off to Ca'lisle!"

"No, we'll see what it is first," was Nick's answer; and instead of going to the kitchen door, he made for the byre. Instinctively he sought to escape observation, for a horrible fear had taken

possession of him, a fear much greater even than that of his companion for "bogles."

With hands that trembled a good deal, he felt for the matches which stood on a shelf by the lantern, struck a light, and kindled the wick of the candle inside.

The cows rattled their chains and turned their heads to see what this unwonted visit, after they had been shut up for the night, might mean. But their milkers did not stop to inform them.

Shielding the light with the flap of his jacket from the onslaughts of the wind, Nick hurried back to the ruins, closely followed by Meg. She was not so frightened now since she had heard that there was a *body* in the case. For Meggie Ridley was afraid of nobody, and could hold her own with any living thing; for "bogles," she would have told you, are not bodies, neither, according to her, are they alive. No, the boy and girl had changed places now, and the former was the one who trembled and feared far more than the latter.

Inside the ruined keep, they were in some measure sheltered from the force of the wind, and Nick was able to let the light of his lantern shine more freely.

Moving along the grass in front of them, it lit up portions of the old grey walls, leaving the rest in intense shade, and throwing strange shadows upon the ground. All looked so eerie that Meggie began to shudder again, and clung closer to her companion's arm.

As the light came nearer, Viper ran out of the shadow to meet her friends, uttering cries of delight at seeing them again. Then she went back to the corner of the keep furthest from where they were, put her nose into the air, and howled dismally.

"Whisht, Viper!" exclaimed Nick, impatiently; then, setting his teeth, he knelt down by the newly-fallen stones, holding the lantern close to something which lay partly beneath them.

"Ay, it's *her*, sure enough," he said, after what seemed to Meggie a lengthy examination, turning towards her a face which looked white in the lantern-light.

"Whae (who)?" asked Meggie, curiously.

"Why, whae but Trampin' Sal!"

"My goodness!" exclaimed the girl, in a tone almost of disappointment; "to think of its bein' nobbut Sally, after all! Eh, what a fright she gave me!"

"Nobbut Sally?" repeated the boy, bitterly; "why, I'd raythe it had been any ither body in the world than her!"

"Ay, I was forgettin'," answered Meggie. "But, Nick, however can she have got here?"

"She's had a drap o'er much, I guess," said poor Nick, looking into the drink-sodden face of the wretched woman. "She's lost her way and got in here, likely, and hasn't known how to get out again. Then she's lain down, and the wall's fallen a-top of her."

"Is she dead?" asked the girl, in an awed voice.

"Nay, I diven't think 't," answered the boy. "Here, haud t' light, Meggie, while I heave the stones off her, and then we'll see."

He suited the action to the word, and had soon freed the body of the woman, on whom, as it chanced, not many stones had fallen, and these not the largest.

Sally groaned several times during the process, and, when she was free, she gave a long sigh of relief.

"She's comin' to, I guess," said Nick, as he rolled the last stone on to the grass. "Meggie, lass, ye might look to her. I'd rayther she didn't see me first."

He stepped aside with a shudder which he could not repress, took the light from his companion's hand, and left her to do what she could for the tramp.

Meggie, for whom Tramping Sal had none of the terrors which she possessed for Nick, raised the woman's head upon her lap in a cool, matter-of-fact sort of way, loosened her dress, took off her battered bonnet, and let the cold wind blow freely among her grizzled hair. For John Ridley's daughter, young though she was, was a self-possessed little person and eminently practical.

Presently Sal's eyelids quivered, and then opened slowly. She stared up into Meggie's face.

"Come, ye're better now, Sal, aren't ye?" asked the girl, cheerfully. "Ye'd better get up and gan afore yere perished wi' cauld."

Thus adjured, the woman made an effort to rise, but fell back again.

"I canna!" she groaned. "My leg's brak', I think, and my back's bad."

Meggie looked at Nick, and shook her head.

"Whativer's to be done?" she asked.

Nick rumpled his red hair.

"I dinna ken," he said at last, in a helpless tone.

"Hoots, lad!" exclaimed the girl, impatiently. It was her turn now to be contemptuous, and she was in no wise averse to paying off her companion for scoffing at her earlier on in the evening. "Ye're good for nowt when it comes to managing a business like this—menfolk niver are! Now, dinna stand starin' there like a simpleton! Gan in and fetch moother. *She*'ll ken what to do."

"Nay!" cried the boy, galvanized into life by this suggestion, and vehemently opposed to it. "Nay, we maunna tell Mistress Ridley. *She*'ll never let Sally inside her doors, ye ken that. And, besides—— Oh, Meggie, cannot ye think o' some way of gettin' her off before folks here find her out? I canna bide to have her thrown in my face. Come, think how we can manage it, there's a good lass."

He said this coaxingly, whispering the words into her ear lest Sally should hear.

Scorn his fears as she might, the girl was touched. She thought for a few minutes.

"Well," she said, presently, "we might try and bear her into t' little calf-house—it's nighest—so

as to be out o' t' cauld, while ye gan to t' Union and tell them to fetch her."

"Ay, we might dae that," answered the boy, approvingly. "I'll set down t' lantern on this wa', then ye can try and lift her feet, while I lift her head."

They did so. Sally was heavy, and groaned deeply; but, truth to tell, neither of those young Samaritans was sufficiently tender-hearted towards her to pay much attention. To get her out of the way undiscovered was all that they cared for just then.

"I diven't believe her leg's broke, after all," remarked Meggie, as they laid their burden down on some straw in the corner of the warm calf-house; "she couldna kick like that if it was."

"Ay, she's broke my shin, I think!" answered Nick, with a quavering laugh. Not that the boy was hard-hearted, but it was a relief to him just then to be able to look at matters in a slightly less tragical light.

"Now, Meggie," he added presently, "ye'd better gan in, while I slip down to t' toon. The sooner they tak' her away t' better."

But the removal was not to be so speedy as Nick desired. The workhouse authorities refused to send for Sally till next morning, and it was a very wakeful bedfellow that lay beside Viper that night in the "servant lad's" loft at Bellister farm.

Whenever he managed to fall asleep for a few minutes, Nick dreamed of moaning winds and

groaning captives, who looked at him from out of the ruins with faces sometimes ghostly, sometimes mocking, while Teddy's jeering laugh kept sounding in his ears, and Teddy's figure, which he could never get at, played hide-and-seek with him among the old walls. Once he fancied that Tramping Sal had caught him in her arms and was carrying him down to the dungeon, and he woke, bathed in perspiration, to find the grey dawn beginning to steal through his uncurtained window, and Viper watching him with puzzled eyes from the foot of the bed.

He jumped up hastily, fearing that he was late, and that the people from the Union might tap at the kitchen-door before he could forestall them. But no, Sally was still in the calf-house when he went to see, lying on the straw in an uneasy sleep.

Nick stood beside her for some moments, looking down at her by the light of his lantern. The coarse face was of a purplish red. The blear eyes were closed, and the loose lips were half open. She looked a repulsive creature, indeed, as she lay there, breathing heavily, and moaning at times, half-drunken, half-delirious, as it seemed to Nick.

"She canna be my moother! She *canna!*" he murmured, with a shudder of disgust. And then the wish arose in his heart, wicked, maybe, but perfectly natural, that death might take from his path the wretched woman who claimed him as her son.

Poor Nick! Can we blame him for the wish, we who have good parents of whom we are proud? I think not. And yet it was an awful wish; even

the wisher was conscious of that while his young heart rose in passionate revolt against the hard lot which had poisoned life for him at its very source.

He was full of bitterness as he stood there, bitter against men, bitter even against the God, Whom, poor fellow, he hardly knew. If this woman were, indeed, his mother, what could be expected of him?

And then came another terrible reflection. "What does it matter what I do? I might as well give up tryin' to keep straight if I'm *her* bairn! But it *canna* be; it isn't possible, and I winnot believe 't!" concluded the boy, starting away from the bare idea of kinship with this miserable outcast. "I wish—oh, I wish——"

But the wish went no further just then, for, at that moment, the men arrived who were to take the tramp to the workhouse.

It was later on in the morning, while the milking was in process, that Nick revealed to Meggie the thought which had been in his heart.

"Meggie," he said suddenly, "ye asked me once what I'd dae if I were rich; I ken now. I'd give onything she'd take to Trampin' Sal if she'd nobbut go away and niver come nigh me again!"

CHAPTER IX.

TREASURE-TROVE.

THAT same afternoon found Nick and Meggie once more among the ruins, trying to put the stones into some sort of order, which had fallen from the wall on the previous night, for, small as seemed the chance that the inhabitants of Bellister farmhouse would fail to hear of the accident to Tramping Sal, Nick was feverishly anxious to efface all traces of her presence.

The weather was calm again by now. The wind had sunk, and the sky was swept clear of clouds. The sleety rain which had fallen the night before, gave a hoary look to the grey ruins, and just whitened the grass and the nettle-stalks which grew rankly within the keep.

Now and then the sun, which was shining coldly, caught one of these tiny crystals, causing it to flash like silver, as the lazy breeze, which was all that was left of the recent gale, waved the stalk which held it to and fro.

Viper was sniffing suspiciously around, as though she still remembered that some one had been on the premises who had no business there, and were not quite sure whether or not the coast was clear.

"Well, ye're nae great hand at mason-wark, Nick!" exclaimed Meggie, presently, with a merry

laugh, as, just when he thought that his task was nearly completed, the stones, which her companion had so carefully built up, suddenly slipped from their places, and came rolling down again, carrying another piece of the wall along with them.

Nick uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"What garred them dae that?" he asked. "Ye jogged them, Meggie, I dae believe!"

"Nay, but I didn't," answered the girl. "Stand back, lad, quick! There's mair to come yet."

She caught the boy's jacket and pulled him back, just as another rush of stones fell rumbling from the walls into the enclosure. A cloud of dust rose into the air, and the old walls of the keep echoed and re-echoed with the sound.

"My goodness!" cried Meggie; "you've done it now, lad."

Nick looked in dismay at the gap in the wall and at the litter of stones which again strewed the ground at its foot.

Viper, who had been disturbed by the noise, ran backwards and forwards, barking loudly.

"Whisht!" exclaimed Nick, impatiently. "We shall be havin' all the countryside aboot us directly. It's lucky there's naebody at heam, this afternoon, but our twae sel's, Meggie."

"It is that," was the answer. "But moother's nobbut slipped through to t' toon; she'll be landin' back directly, and Teddy'll be comin' in to his tea. Come, lad, I'll help ye to side up a bit; but it's nae use tryin' to build."

Nick, however, did not seem to hear. He was attentively examining the hole in the wall left by the fallen stones. The walls of the keep were very thick, and, as a rule, perfectly solid. But the portion which had fallen seemed to have been an exception. Instead of the solid six feet of masonry which formed the rest, this part of the wall appeared to have been built in two leaves with a hollow space between. The stones which had fallen had evidently composed the inner leaf, for the outer was still standing, and the hollow space which had been left in the thickness was perfectly apparent.

Cautiously clambering over the fallen stones, Nick went close up to the wall, and, using what care he could to avoid loosening more of the old building, he put his head into the cavity.

Meggie stood outside watching him closely. Every now and then she uttered a word of warning, but she was, evidently, as curious as he was himself.

When Nick drew his head again out of the hole his eyes were sparkling.

"I do believe it's a hidy-hole, or somethin' o' that sort, Meggie," he said excitedly. "Run and fetch t' lantern, and we'll look in."

The girl did as she was told, and soon returned with the light.

When she came back, she saw that Nick had drawn himself up, and was kneeling on the broken wall with his body half in half out of the hole.

"Tak' care, lad!" she cried; "we shall be havin'

ye buried next. How would it be if some mair on t' wall rushed, and brought ye along wi't?"

But Nick took no notice of this terrible possibility, and Meggie, who was crimson with excitement, clambered in her turn over the stones and handed the lantern to the explorer.

"Mebbe, we'll find a *skeleton*," she said in a low voice of mingled awe and delight. "Eh, lad, div ye think we will?"

A little tremor ran through her as she spoke, and she looked nervously over her shoulder. But the sun was still shining on the rimy grass where Viper was sitting, wagging her rope of a tail, and evidently using all her endeavours to repress the barks to which her master had objected.

Both Meggie and Viper had to endure what seemed to them an eternity of waiting before the explorer had finished his researches. When at length he slowly backed out of the hole and handed the lantern again to his assistant, Meggie could see that he was trembling all over.

"What is't, lad?" she asked impatiently; "thoo's found somethin', I can see that. Is it—oh, is it *really* a skeleton?"

But still the boy was silent. Not till he had withdrawn his body completely from the hole, and was standing by her side on the heap of fallen stones, did Meggie's eager eyes make the discovery which her ears had in vain been opened for.

Yes, sure enough Nick had found something. He was holding in his hand an object which looked

like a small iron box, as red as rust could make it.

But what was in it?

Meggie thought of the skeleton, but decided, with much disappointment, that it was too small for such an enclosure. Something interesting, however, she felt sure it must contain, and her fingers itched to open the closed lid.

"Be sharp, lad, be sharp!" she cried, springing down from the heap of stones without any of the caution she had used in ascending. "Let us see what's in 't. Eh, what a time ye are! Canna ye brak 't open?"

Nick, meanwhile, had seated himself on one of the stones, and was trying to open the lid with fingers whose trembling showed that he was in no way less excited than his more demonstrative companion.

But try as he might the lid would not open. It was evident that the box was locked. Failing in his endeavour, Nick at last took the stone which his impatient little companion handed to him, and set himself to break into what he could not open. Meggie stood over him, her rosy face scarlet, her body trembling all over with excitement, while Viper sat in front of the pair wagging her ropy tail and moving her prick ears, jealous of the attention given to such a trifle as a rusty box.

The sun sank lower and lower towards the western hills, throwing its crimson glow on the grey ruins, on the trio within, and on the iron box which had

been hidden away from the light, who can say how many hundred years.

Eastern stories tell how the opening of a chest, a jar, a bottle, locked or sealed up for centuries, has resulted in the letting loose of a terrible fate, ready to swoop down upon the devoted head of the opener.

Neither Nick nor Meggie Ridley had ever heard these wonderful tales. And, yet, their hearts beat during the opening of that mysterious box, as heavily as though they fully expected a "djin," as terrible as any in Eastern fable, to leap out upon them when the lid should open.

It was long in doing so, very long, considering the rusty condition of the box. But, at length, though failing to break the lock, Nick succeeded in loosening the hinges. The lid came up with a sudden jerk, and out rolled, not a heap of mouldering bones, as Meggie had fondly continued to hope, in spite of her better judgment; not a cloud of smoke, which is the essence of bottled spirits (of the Arabian sort, of course), but a ringing shower of large gold pieces.

They lay in a shining confusion upon the rimy grass, the sun finding them out one by one and drawing the sparkles from their surface, as it had done a few weeks before from Nick's florin. Only, this time, the sparkles were gold and not silver.

Viper jumped up and barked again, as she ran after the rolling coins.

Meggie uttered a long-drawn "Oh-h!" of wonder and admiration.

Nick said nothing, but his eyes sparkled as they followed the golden shower, and his cheeks flushed red as the setting sun. For full sixty seconds not a word was spoken, nor did either of the discoverers move.

Then Meggie suddenly threw herself on her knees upon the grass and began hastily to gather up the coins.

"Be sharp, lad," she said to her companion. "The sun 'll be down directly, and then we'll not can find them. Eh, what a heap of gold! It would be a sin to lose a single piece."

Nick apparently thought the same, for he followed the girl's example, and soon, so far as they could tell, not a coin remained among the grass. Then they sat down and counted them over. There were twenty in all. But of how much value they were originally, or how much money they now represented, neither of the discoverers could tell. For none of the coins were sovereigns, and though each one bore an effigy, it was not that of our gracious Queen, as even Nick and Meggie could plainly perceive. Hardly had they finished counting their treasure-trove when the red ball of the sun went down in the west, and the click of the gate, opening into the high-road below, warned them that somebody was coming. Nick jumped up hastily.

"Here, give us t' box," he said, taking it from his companion's lap, where it had been during the

counting over. "We'll put it back into t' hole for the present. And, Meggie, dinna let on aboot it till we've made up our minds what to dae."

He climbed hastily onto the stones, thrust the precious box as far into the cavity as his arm would reach, blocked up the entrance in a rough-and-ready fashion, and, followed by Viper and Meggie, made the best of his way round to the farmyard.

As the three rounded the corner of the keep they came suddenly upon Teddy, coming, apparently, from the other direction. He started as he saw them, and so did Meggie and Nick.

"Hollo!" said Meggie; "sae it's you, Ted! I thought it was moother comin' back. But there she is and arl."

For Mrs. Ridley at that moment, panting with her toil up the steep hill, weighted as she was with a heavy basket, came into the farmyard.

"Goodness me!" she cried in her harsh voice. "Whatever have ye been after, lad? Why, the kye's niver been watered, sae far as I can mak' oot, and t' sun already set! It's easy to see t' maister-man's awa', ye lazy rascal ye!"

Nick flushed. He was quite conscious that the reproof was deserved. For the first time since his return to Bellister he had taken advantage of Ridley's absence to neglect his duties.

Without a word he went to the byres, but still he could hear Mrs. Ridley's loud voice, scolding and storming, across the yard.

She had reached the kitchen by this time, and had discovered new food for her wrath.

"Well, I niver!" she exclaimed, setting down her basket on the table and throwing up her hands. "I come back tewed (done up) and tired, wantin' my tea that bad I cud hardlys clim' t' bank. And what do I find? T' fire black oot, and niver sae much as t' cloth laid. Well, Meggie, I *am* ashamed o' ye, I am that. Fowerteen year auld, and not to be trusted yet! Whativer have ye been doin', bairn?"

Meggie hung the curly head on which all this wrath had fallen like a pattering shower of hail. She, too, was well aware that she was but getting her due, for Mrs. Ridley always gave full measure, and none of her household expected less. But it was not so much the scolding that discomfited the girl as the difficulty she found in answering her mother's question. Nick's injunction to silence fettered her usually outspoken tongue, and caused her a very unaccustomed feeling of embarrassment.

Receiving no answer, Mrs. Ridley faced round and fixed her daughter with a gimlet-like gaze, such as only pale grey eyes can attain to.

"Ye've been in mischief, ye huzzy ye! I can see that," she said presently, as she looked at the crimson face of her little daughter. "Ye've been idlin' yer time wi' that good-for-nothing young feller yer faither was sae set on bringin' in. I aye telt him nae good would come on't, and I'm reet. A lass like ye ought to ken better than to tak'

up wi' a beggar's brat like yon. I'll not have it, Meggie, and sae I tell ye!"

"We were after nae harm, moother," answered the girl, half-crying.

"Nae harm! and what d'ye call nae harm?" the mother went on remorselessly. "Come, let me hear yer notion, bairn? Lakin', (playing) sez t'a? Ye're gettin' over-auld to lake, I tell ye that, and ye'll just have to give over. When *I* was fowerteen I'd hae been 'shamed to waste my time like that. Why, I was my faither's housekeeper when I was nobbut a year aulder nor that!"

Mrs. Ridley tossed her head with conscious pride, and Meggie hoped for a moment that the scolding was over. But she was mistaken.

"And what were ye lakin' at?" was the next question.

"Oh, nowt partic'ler!" answered the girl, feeling as though she were being pinned into a corner, and already beginning to wish that the iron box had never been discovered. "Well, then," she went on, finding that her answer was considered insufficient, "we were just buildin' up a bit of t' castle wall that was blown down, last neet."

This seemed to satisfy Mrs. Ridley for the present; for, beyond a contemptuous, "Ye might ha' found somethin' better to do!" she said no more, just then, and she and Meggie busied themselves in making the fire and getting the tea.

CHAPTER X.

"IS THY SERVANT A DOG?"

It was not till milking-time, that evening, that Meggie and Nick were able to discuss the secret which was already beginning to weigh so heavily upon the mind of the former. Not a word had been spoken during tea by any of the party.

Mrs. Ridley's severe countenance still lowered ominously above her tea-cups, and the culprits felt that the storm was not over, and refrained from speaking lest it should again come down upon them.

Teddy sat in his usual place, watching the faces of his companions, when he thought he could do so without catching their eyes in return, but immediately looking away when he was caught in the act. This, however, was not an unusual occupation with Teddy, and attracted no particular attention. Indeed, the two discoverers were too much absorbed in the thought of the great discovery they had made, that afternoon, to have leisure to notice the researches of others.

No sooner were they in the byre, however, and had begun to milk, than Meggie burst out.

"Nick," she said abruptly, "what are ye goin' to dae wi' that money?"

"Hush!" answered the boy. "Speak lower, lass somebody might hear ye."

"There's nobbut Viper and the kye," retorted the girl; "and if there were, what would it matter?"

Nick did not answer immediately, and the girl renewed her first question in a more cautious tone.

"Weel," answered the boy at last, in a dubious voice, "I dinna joost ken. When money's found like that, whae does't belong to?"

The question posed Meggie.

"I thowt," she said at last, in a voice as doubtful as Nick's own—"I thowt that what folks found they keept."

"Well, that's just what I'm not sae sure aboot," said the boy, slowly.

There was a long pause. The milk poured into the two pails in rhythmical streams. The cows munched the hay in their stalls, rattling their chains softly as they did so.

"Nick!" exclaimed the girl at last, with sudden excitement. "It's a reg'lar fortun'! It's enough to mak' a body rich!"

"Mebbe," answered the boy, slowly. "But the question is, whae owns it by reet? That's the question, Meggie."

"If it's yours, ye could bribe Trampin' Sal to go away for good and all—if she disn't die of her hurts," the girl said after another pause. She had put her companion's unspoken thought into words.

"Ay," answered the boy, "I could so. Eh, lass,

but I wish——" He broke off, as though he could not trust himself to express the desire that was in his heart. His voice was low and husky, and the broken sentence ended in a long sigh.

"Well," said Meggie at last, "we maun just ask faither."

There was a cheerful decision about the girl's manner of saying this which contrasted with the painful struggle that was evidently going on in the boy's mind.

"Ay, we'll *have* to tell him, onyhow," she went on, as he did not speak. "Moother's been at me arlready aboot what we've been doin', and I was sair put to what to say. I niver had a secret before. Besides, the gold was found on faither's land."

"But it's not his own," put in Nick, quickly. "If onybody, leavin' out us, has a claim, it'll be t' landlord."

"I ken naethin' aboot that," was the decided answer. "But whether or not, faither must be telt."

Nick made no rejoinder for some minutes, then he said, with another sigh—

"Ay, I suppose sae. Ye'd better tell him yersel', Meggie."

"Ay, Nick, I will," answered the girl, heartily, "as soon as iver he comes back."

That was the whole of the conversation which passed during milking-time. But it quite satisfied Meggie. Her feelings of discomfort fled away, and her face was bright again and her manner natural as she came in to supper.

But Nick's countenance, as he followed her, was still sombre. It seemed hard to him that he should find the money he so much wanted, only to give it up. After all, who was there that needed it more than he? Who would be the worse if he were to take possession of his find and say nothing about it? Meggie of course should have her share, since she was there at the finding. Surely that might satisfy her sense of justice without telling Ridley. Or suppose he took the half, and arranged with Meggie that only her share should be mentioned?

The idea was tempting. He thought over it for a long time after he had finished his supper, as he sat by the fire, looking fixedly into the red caverns of the burning coals.

To tell the master, Nick said to himself, would mean nothing more nor less than the loss of everything, so far as he was concerned. Possibly, he might be allowed to keep a solitary gold piece as the finder; but that, he felt assured, would be all. The seeming injustice of the proceeding angered him. If any one had a right to this money it appeared to him that it was, surely, the finder.

Who else had a stronger claim? Till a few hours ago, no one had so much as known that the iron box existed. It had probably lain for many hundred years in the wall of the old castle. Some old fellow of the moss-trooping days, whose bones, maybe, were whitening in a peat bog on the Borders, had, probably, put it there, forgetting to tell his heir

before he rode away on the foray from which he never returned. Who, then, would be the loser, supposing nothing were now said? Not the moss-raider, for he was dead long ago, and his family, the ancient owners of the castle, had all died out. Who, then?

Ay, this was the question. And poor Nick, sitting there over the fire, found it a very knotty one. He knew nothing at all of the law relating to such finds, and his natural instincts were those of the dog who scratches up a bone, and then, instantly appropriating his find, carries it off to enjoy in private. No one had taken any trouble to teach him better. No one seemed to expect from him conduct befitting a higher code of honour. And yet, argue the case as he might, he was conscious all the time that the course which Meggie had suggested was the right one, and he would not recall his approval. No, hard though the results might be, Ridley must be told.

That night, however, whenever he slept, it was to dream of the shower of the shining gold which had fallen on the grass at his feet when he opened the iron box. Each time he dreamed the fascination grew stronger, and when he awoke with a start between the dreams the temptation at least to look once more on the treasure-trove had increased to a more passionate desire.

Well, why not? There could be no harm in looking. John Ridley might return at any hour, and then his chance of feasting his eyes once more

on the golden hoard, with no one by to share it with him, would be gone for ever.

Now, a carefully trained student of morality would have known quite well that even to look on what the heart lusts after is sin. It is to put one's self into such a position as to strengthen the temptation and give it opportunity to triumph over weakness already sorely pressed. But poor Nick was no student. He was but an ignorant lad with unchecked natural tendencies, inherited, in all probability, from generations of evil-doers, which only opportunity was wanting to bring into play. And now the opportunity had come. And yet he struggled. For there was good in the lad as well as evil. Was he not a child of God? And does God allow His children, even the most ignorant, to sin seriously for the first time without a struggle?

It might have been about two o'clock in the morning when Nick awoke, bathed in perspiration, from a third dream of the gold. He had seen in his vision some one mounting the heap of fallen stones and taking the box from its hiding-place. This was too much for his resolution. He jumped out of bed, hastily slipped into his clothes, and stole down the ladder from his loft, forbidding Viper with a stern gesture to get off the foot of the bed where she was lying.

The moon was shining brightly as he opened the door of the stable and crept into the open air. There were large fleecy clouds about, however, sailing slowly across the dark blue sea of air overhead,

and bearing down towards the floating silver boat of the waning moon, so that every now and then it went under, as though swamped by the berg-like clouds. During the earlier part of the night there seemed to have been frost, for the air was still keen, and there was thin ice over the puddles in the yard. But the clouds showed that the frost was less intense, and that a change of some sort was coming—probably snow, thought Nick, as he looked up at the sky.

He shivered as he crossed the yard and passed into the black shadows which lay among the ruins; but it was as much from excitement as from cold. Here the grass felt stiff under his feet, and he could hear the crisp rustle which it made as he passed.

He kept as much as possible under the shadow of the walls, though he knew that the chances were that nobody would see him, even if he crossed over the very centre of the cloth of silver which the moon and the frost had combined to lay upon the more open reaches of the grass.

How still it was!

He could hear his own heart thump and the sound of the breath which came fast from between his parted lips. The rustle of his steps among the frozen grass sounded in his ears with an alarming noise, and he looked behind him more than once, believing that some one must be following him. But no. When he stopped, the rustling stopped too, and the silvery spaces were blank and tenantless.

As Nick passed into the keep an owl hooted,

and sailed away into the night from some window overhead. It was all that the boy could do to repress a cry.

What a fool he was, he said to himself—nearly as timid as Meggie. Superstitious fears had not troubled him before when he had passed through the ruins at night. Why, then, should they now?

He could not tell, but he knew that he was afraid, and the sensation was extremely disagreeable. As he came to the corner where the wall had fallen, it seemed to him that a silent shadow flitted round the angle. He stopped stock still, his heart going rapidly pit-a-pat. What could it be? In another moment he almost laughed out loud. It was only one of those big white bergs in the blue ocean overhead swamping the moon and throwing the earth beneath into temporary shadow. Yes, that was all. Nick drew a deep breath of relief and felt his way in the dark to the corner of the wall. There he waited a little till the moon-boat should have righted herself again, and he could see his way to the hiding-hole where the treasure lay. But as he stood inactive, he experienced another terrible shock of fear. What if his dream were true, and some one had been there before him! What if the gold were gone? Waves of alternate cold and heat crept over his body during those few moments that the moon was gone. It seemed ages before the berg swept by and shadow once more gave place to brilliant light.

Breathing hard with anxiety, Nick mounted

the fallen stones, raised himself to the edge of the hole, and felt in its black profundity. His fingers touched the box. He drew it out with another long breath of relief, carefully clambered down again, and carried it to the edge of the black border of shadow beyond which lay the silver carpet of light.

Here, he thought, he might look at the golden pieces, and count them over, ready to draw back into the shadow should any one disturb him. This, at least, it seemed to him just then, it was only right to do; for, with the impression of his dream still strong upon him, he felt it necessary to assure himself that the money was all there. He was its keeper for the present, and was bound, as he told himself, to answer for the safety of every piece.

He opened the box, and held it so that the silver flood of moonlight fell full upon the contents.

How wonderfully they glittered! Not with the solid yellow glow which daylight had shown, but with a white, mysterious, fairy-like sheen, which gave them still stronger glamour in the eyes of the penniless boy.

He had heard of men who had suddenly grown rich. There had been accounts of such in the papers, of which he sometimes got a sight—men who from paupers had been made millionaires at a bound by a lucky lottery number. He had hardly envied them before; for to those who have either never possessed it, or never specially needed it, gold requires to be seen and its want experienced, before its full fascination can be felt.

Meggie,too,had been accustomed to weave stories, or to tell again those which she diligently studied in a certain old fairy-tale book about goblin-gold brought by gnomes out of caves and dens of the earth. About measures of corn and peas which had turned to golden showers when thrown to the fowls by virtuous children. About geese which laid golden eggs, and birds which carried precious stones in their claws.

But though Nick had been pleased to listen as he lay in the sun by her side under the castle wall in summer, or among the hay in the barn in winter, his imagination had not been sufficiently strong to conjure up such a vision as to awaken his desires.

Now, however, all was changed. The lottery of fortune had turned up for him a golden prize, and no goblins or fairies could have conjured up riches from a more unexpected place. Here was gold—visible, palpable, real gold,—which his eyes could see and his fingers touch, and, already, it was working its magical, dangerous spell upon the boy who had never possessed such riches in all his life.

It was not only what gold could do, it was the greed for the gold itself which shone in Nick's eyes, reflected there from the sparkling, bewitching beauty of the broad, moonlit pieces, as he counted over his treasure-trove. Ay, it was all there in full tale. He had satisfied himself on that point, at any rate. But though this was so, Nick was not yet satisfied. His eyes continued to gloat on the

golden pieces again lying safely at the bottom of the box.

The temptation to appropriate them had grown to giant strength. With these what could he not do? Not only free himself from Tramping Sal, but make himself into a rich man, rich enough to have no questions asked concerning his birth. For of world-lore Nick knew enough to be aware that gold, like charity, covers a multitude of defects.

John Ridley was not yet back. Suppose he were to take the box and go off with it at once, who but Meggie would be the wiser? He did not think that she would betray him, and he would keep her share, and give it her, doubled, trebled, when as a rich man he could once more show himself again at Bellister.

Oh! dangerous glitter of gold! Dangerous as any evil spirit released from a thousand years' imprisonment, to wreck its honest finder, was this hoard of money to poor ignorant Nick!

"Put it away; do not look at it again, or you will lose all you have—your honesty," whispered his good angel.

"Take it—run away at once. Do not miss the one chance which may come to make you rich and respected," whispered the evil spirit.

"Then, indeed, you would be as bad as they think you—dishonest, ungrateful, worthy to be the son of Tramping Sal," came the voice at his right ear again.

"If they think you bad and treat you like a cur,

why should you try to be anything better?" was whispered on his left.

The soul of the boy seemed torn to pieces. The moonlight vanished again, leaving him and his hoard in darkness.

Then over the rimy grass there came the sound of approaching footsteps.

Nick's heart beat heavily. He tried to rise, but could not for very palsy of fear. Great drops broke out upon his brow.

The rustle came nearer. He could hear something breathing. In another moment whoever this was would be close upon him. With a great effort he sprang to his feet and retreated into the shadow, still holding the iron box.

But the person, whoever it was, followed him. It came quite close, rustling along the stiff grass and nettle-stalks at his feet.

Nick's lips grew dry; his eyes tried to pierce the darkness, but could not. The next moment something jumped upon him, and touched his hand, and then he knew that it was Viper. The dog leaped upon him, licked his hand, and made every demonstration that an affectionate dog can make, and Nick's heart was conscious of a great relief.

Then the moon came out and he saw the dog. She drew him again into the light, pulling his trousers with her teeth, as though to draw him away from the scene of temptation. The moonlight shone in her eyes—the good, faithful, clear eyes of a creature which has no need to conceal its heart.

Nick looked, and then dropped his own before those of the beast. He felt ashamed before her.

"Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?" These words, probably, were unknown to the boy; but, nevertheless, their sense was borne in upon him by the look in Viper's eyes.

He had been called a cur often enough in his friendless life. Should he, by doing this thing, sink himself below the level of a dog, who is faithful to his trust? Meggie had been his good comrade always. Should he requite her kindness by wronging her and degrading himself in her eyes?

The Ridleys, husband and wife, though they had been less than kind, had, nevertheless, received him when no one else would, and given him the only home he had ever known. Should he, for this, do as Mrs. Ridley had said, and bite the hand which had fed him? No, he would not. Even for the sake of the gold and all that it could bring, he would not. Stooping to caress Viper, he clambered again up to the hole, replaced the box, and, followed by the terrier, crept back again to bed.

It was pitch dark again as he returned through the ruins, for the moon had set, but he no longer felt afraid, nor was he ashamed before his dumb friend now. For the temptation had been overcome. His good angel had triumphed; aided by one of those things which the world calls mean, the mighty spirit of darkness had been put to flight. And this ally was nothing but a little dog.

CHAPTER XI.

GONE!

THE next afternoon "the master-man," as he was called at Bellister, returned home. But he came back in such a temper that none of the members of his household desired to break through the outworks of gloomy and sullen silence with which John Ridley was wont to surround his wrath.

They knew how hot was the passion of the man when once it was allowed to break those bounds which North-country prudence sets up, and no one at Bellister desired to stir the smouldering fire. The business which had taken him to Carlisle had gone less well than was usual with him, and to make matters worse, on the principle that when "the cat's away the mice do play," the pitmen had taken the opportunity to be insubordinate towards the man who was temporarily in charge of the pit.

Ridley would have liked to visit their offences with a very heavy hand, and his inability to strike as hard as he desired, for fear of consequences, did not improve his chafing temper. He spoke but little, after his return, having much to see to at the pit, and except to find fault, for a whole day, his short answers to any question discouraged speech.

Thus it came to pass that Meggie's communication, which was to have been made directly her father returned, was choked off, and finally

forgotten by her till after dinner on the third day following Ridley's return.

Then, at last, having helped her mother to wash the dishes, let down her sleeves over her plump arms, and taken out her knitting, Meggie looked towards her father with a question in her bright eyes.

John Ridley was having his afternoon pipe over the fire, sitting in his armchair. His long legs were stretched out to the blaze, his hands rested on his knees. He puffed the blue wreathes of smoke calmly towards the hams and flitches which hung, dry and brown, from the rafters overhead.

If any man ever looked at his ease, both in body and mind, it was John Ridley on that January afternoon.

His daughter Meggie's silent question was answered to her satisfaction. The evil spirit of temper which had possessed him for nearly three days had at length gone out.

Reassured, the child pulled out her three-legged stool from under the table and seated herself at her father's knee.

"Well, my lass," he said presently, when the two had sat together for some minutes in silence, "hoo is arl wi' thee?"

She looked up brightly.

"Oh, gey weel, faither," she said, rubbing her apple-blossom cheek against his rough hand. "Blossom's had a quay calf while thoo was off at Ca'lisle. Didst ken that?"

"Nay, I didn't," answered the man. "Whae was

to tell me if *thoo* didn't, Meg? Why didst tha keep't sae dark, bairn?"

The girl fidgeted a little. She did not know what to say, for the real cause of her silence up to this time could hardly be mentioned.

"And what else has been astir, hereawa', Meg?" asked Ridley, letting his former question pass, to the girl's great relief.

"Not mickle, faither," she replied. "Let's see. The tappit hen has begun to lay—I found her egg under the gig in the car'-shed, and—— Eh, but I was clean forgettin'! There's been somethin' mair fund nor that—somethin' a deal mair valabler. Guess what it is, faither."

"Ma wood-axe? I dropt it, this month back, ahint the logs in the wood-shed."

"Nay, it isna that. Guess again."

"Yer moother's big darner that she made sich a rout about, last week?"

"Nay, nay, faither. Somethin' a *deal* mair valabler than a darner, or a wood-axe owther."

"Teddy's purse, then? His grandma in Haltwhistle filled it for him at Kirsmas, and when I telt him, next day, to put the money in the bank he said he'd lost it."

The girl laughed.

"Teddy's brass niver bides wi'm," she said meaningly. "Nor I niver heard of his findin' it again, yance it was gone. Ye're a bad guesser, faither. But there! If ye were to guess arl day, ye'd hardlys hit on what it is. D'ye give't up?"

"Ay. Ye'd better tell me at yance, since it's somethin' sae mighty mysterious."

"Weel, then, Nick has fund a fortun'."

John Ridley took his pipe from his mouth, sat up, and turning his little daughter's face towards him looked into her eyes.

"Lass," he said, "thoo shouldna fule thy faither that gate. Nick fund a fortun', indeed. Had awa wi' ye!"

He let the girl's head go, leaned back in his chair again, and replaced his pipe.

"Ay, but he *has*, faither; it's nobbut t' treuth I's tellin'."

"Believin's seein'," said Ridley, sententiously, without moving his pipe from his thin lips.

"Thoo's vara unbelievin' to-day, faither; but never mind, Nick'll show thee when he comes in."

"Where is he, then?"

"Waterin' the kye, likely. Shall I call of him, faither?"

"Nay, nay, thoo's oot o' thy reckonin', lass," grumbled Ridley. "This is nobbut Januarÿ. Keep thy fulin' for the first of April."

Meggie lifted her head at this and looked into her father's face. His voice warned her that the evil spirit was not so far gone as she had thought, and his expression showed that she was right. She rose from her stool.

"Nay, faither," she said, dropping her jesting tone, "I wadna mak' game o' thee, that gait; it's sober

earnest I'm in. Here comes Nick; he'll tell thee sae hissel'.—Nick," she went on, addressing the lad, who at that minute entered the kitchen, "faither winnot believe me aboot—thoo kens what. Tell him what thoo's fund."

"Ay, speak up, lad, and nae fulin'," cried the farmer, still nettled by the notion that his daughter and "servant-lad" had conspired together to play him a practical joke. "If thoo's fund aught, say sae; if not, mak' an end o' this nonsense, or I'll ken t' reason why!"

Ridley's cheek had reddened, and his cold eyes were sparkling—sure signs of rising anger.

Nick saw the signals, and felt provoked in his turn. He was ready to tell his secret, but to be goaded to it was quite another matter.

"I telt her she could tell ye," he said sullenly.

Ridley sprang to his feet.

"Nae insolence, ye young dog ye!" he exclaimed angrily. "Hast forgettin' how t' stick feels? Stop this fulin', I say, or——"

He raised his hand, but Meggie caught it in both of hers.

"Faither," she said softly, "Nick's not makin' game ony mair nor me. There, he telt me to tell ye, and mebbe I'd better hae done 't at yance. Him and me fund a box in the cassel wall—the wind blew down a bit, and made a hole, ye ken—and, when we opened the lid, it was full o' gold."

Ridley's eyes glistened.

"Say ye sae?" he asked eagerly, the brief account given by his little daughter sounding convincing in his ears. "And when was this?"

"The day afore ye cam' heam."

"And why wasn't I told sooner?"

The temper was still in an unsettled state, and ready to fire up at any moment. Meggie's sharp wits told her this at once, and she hastened to turn the attack.

"Ye mauna scold Nick, faither," she said soothingly. "It was *my* fault. He telt me to tell, and I clean forgot. But now ye can see for yersel'. Come along, lad, lead t' way."

Nick obeyed her, still sullenly, but without a word. He was doubted, he was suspected, he could see that, and he resented it.

"What's arl this aboot?" asked Mrs. Ridley, who had come in while her daughter was speaking. "A box o' gold in t' cassel wall? A pack o' lies, I'll wager onything!"

But, nevertheless, she went with the party; for gold draws people after it in the everyday world as well as in fairy-tales.

They went through the yard-gate into the ruins, and passed within the four walls of the keep, Nick going first, then John Ridley and his daughter, followed by Mrs. Ridley and little Viper. Teddy was not there.

The afternoon light was upon the grey walls. The ivy waved its glossy leaves in the breeze. Overhead was the pale, bluish-grey sky of winter, and

on the ground was a slight cover of snow, which had fallen since Nick was there before.

But Nick was not looking at the snow-covered ground, nor yet at the sky or the ivy. His eyes were fixed on the hole in the wall, and in fancy he was looking his last at what was hidden within. This treasure-trove had been something to him beyond all that he had known before in his poor, bare life. It was like a bit of romance let into the page of a dull history. He had lit on it by chance. He had dreamed of it, had wondered about its past, and had speculated as to its future. He had seen it by sunlight, by moonlight, had fought a battle over it which left him sore and tender. That iron box was full of possibilities to him; it seemed in some way to contain his fate. Till now only he and Meggie had looked at the gold which lay within, and, somehow, he could not bear to think that now it must be, as it were, common property.

Very slowly and reluctantly he clambered over the heap of fallen stones and thrust an unwilling hand into the hole to draw out his treasure from its hiding-place into the pale, prosaic daylight.

The Ridleys stood by, watching him. Surely, thought Meggie, he was long in finding the box, considering that he knew exactly where it was.

She was right; he was very long.

She saw him creep into the hole till he nearly disappeared. Then he went in altogether. What could be the meaning of this?

Meggie beat her little foot upon the snow, and her cheeks turned very red.

Her father and mother looked on grimly, maintaining an awful silence.

At last Nick re-appeared, let himself down, and turned towards the three spectators. His usually brown face had turned very white. The marks left in it by the small-pox stood out with ugly distinctness. His eyes had a scared expression.

"I canna find it," he said, in a thick, husky voice; "it's gone!"

CHAPTER XII.

"THE SACK."

To describe the storm which followed would be no easy matter, neither would it be in any way improving.

One does not count the hailstones in a thunderstorm, or take notes of the scathing lightning. Why, then, should we record the hard words of an angry man, or the stinging taunts of a shrewish woman, who feels that the bit is out of her mouth at last, and that she may attack her victim with impunity?

If Ridley allowed himself to swear at his "servant-lad," his wife knew that she need no longer restrain her feelings, and the storm of tongues which beat

upon poor Nick can safely be left to the imagination.

As for the lad himself, the blow, which the discovery had given him, seemed to have so far stunned him as to prevent him feeling the full force of the attack.

He stood before his master and mistress, hanging his shock red head, and twisting his fingers. What the exact nature of the blame they heaped upon him was, he did not accurately gather. But the indignant flush on Meggie's fair face (who, indeed, was coming in herself for a share of the scolding) showed that she, at least, perfectly understood.

"Ye've nae call to say sae," she said at intervals, when it was possible to make herself heard. "We've nowther on us made game on ye. It's as true as the gospel that the box was here."

"Then what's got it? Tell me that!" asked her father, sharply.

And the question silenced her each time, and made her look sorrowfully towards Nick, with another question in her pretty childish eyes.

Now, Ridley hated ridicule, as a vain man always does, and to have been duped so far as to come out to see a treasure which did not exist, galled him sorely. Moreover, he was disappointed. For, though he said to himself that he had never believed the report, he had certainly allowed his greed for gold to be sufficiently awakened to feel himself cheated when there was nothing to be found.

Disappointment and hurt vanity had, therefore,

combined to knock down all those barriers with which the man's prudence generally fenced his wrath. He had quite forgotten the convenience of having an unpaid servant, and that the vent he was now giving to his temper might deprive him of it. He remembered nothing but that he had been grievously offended, and that the offender was at his mercy.

While the word-storm was at its height, the sun suddenly broke out of the light, misty haze which had veiled it most part of the day. A long slanting beam shot down like a golden dart from the brightening west, falling athwart the ruins and lighting up the snow-covered ground at the place where the wall had fallen.

Meggie, whose eyes, just then, were fixed sorrowfully and wonderingly upon this very spot, suddenly darted forward, stooped, and picked up some small object from among the stones.

"Faither!" she cried breathlessly, handing it to John Ridley, "will ye believe us *now?* Here's yan o' t' gold pieces!"

Ridley took the coin into his hands, his hard words suddenly silenced. His wife, also, ceased her abuse of Nick, and came to look over his shoulder.

In silence the man turned the gold piece round and round, held it up to the light, rang it upon a stone, bit its edge, and then said slowly—

"Ay, it's gold."

"Well, if that's sae," remarked the wife, shortly, "what's come on t' rest?"

Her husband looked up, the momentary shame he

had experienced from feeling himself in the wrong swamped this tapping of a fresh grievance.

"Ay," he said sharply, addressing Nick, who had raised his head and was eagerly looking towards the solitary relic of his treasure—"ay, where's t' rest? Tell me that!"

"That's joost what I canna tell," answered Nick, speaking for the first time since he had made that announcement which had brought down on his head the storm of abuse.

"Whae kent aboot it exceptin' thee?" asked Mrs. Ridley in her sharp voice.

"Naebody but *her*." The boy pointed to Meg.

"And thoo kens naething what's got it, lass?" This from John Ridley.

"Naething. I hanna seen t' box sin' we put it back t' first day."

"Nor ye owther?" asked Ridley, looking doubtfully at Nick.

The red mounted to the boy's brow. He was silent.

"Speak oot, Nick," said Meggie, entreatingly. "Tell them thoo kens naething."

What should he answer—truth or falsehood?

Poor lad, for such as he was, can we wonder if the choice were hard? That visit to the box. The temptation, resisted indeed, but there, nevertheless, to take the gold which had so mysteriously disappeared. These things were difficulties in the way of speaking out. Yet he spoke in spite of them—spoke with slow, shamefaced reluctance.

"It was there when I looked the night afore last."

"Ye confess to lookin', eh?" asked his master, sarcastically.

"Ay."

"And, now I come to think on't, ye were not over-keen to fetch us here at arl? If it hadn't been for oor Meggie, ye'd ha' held yer tongue, and we sud niver have heard ought aboot it."

"It's plain to see whae's got it," put in Mrs. Ridley, disagreeably. "Like moother, like bairn. Trampin' Sal's been in prison afore now."

"And sae shall ye be, ye young dog ye!" exclaimed the farmer, taking the lad roughly by the shoulder and shaking him to and fro. "Ye maun give 't up directly, or tak' the consequences."

"But I havena got it. I wish to goodness I hed!" cried the lad, passionately. "Meggie, can ye stand there," he went on, turning a pair of appealing eyes on the girl—"can ye stand there and let sich a thing as that be kest up again' me, without a word?"

But the girl said nothing. She did not know what to say, for she remembered Nick's reluctance to give up the gold, and, sad at heart though it made her, she felt that his defence was beyond her powers. So she only threw him a wistful glance, which cut him to the heart, and kept silence.

For a moment no one spoke. Even Mrs. Ridley, though her face said a great deal, waited for her husband to give her the lead. The kitchen clock in the house round the corner struck four.

Mrs. Ridley's housewifely instincts awoke immediately.

"Dear sakes!" she cried, "it's gone four, and I hevna sae much as put on t' kettle!"

Without another word she bustled off; tea, for the time, looming larger than hidden treasure in her frugal mind.

"Well," said Ridley, presently, "ye've naething to say for yersel', my lad, that's plain; but this I'll tell ye: owther ye'll hand over that brass to me afore another hour's up, or to prison ye'll gan. I've nae mind to get into trouble wi' my landlord along o' a pack o' rubbish like you. If t' story comes to his ears, it's me that'll be blamed for concealing what's found. D'ye ken that?"

Nick raised his head with a flash of defiance.

"I ken nowt aboot it," he said, "but that I didna tak' t' brass. I wish I *had*, now that it's kesten' (cast) up again' me! But ye canna send me to prison," he added doggedly, "for what I haven't done."

Perhaps Ridley felt that this was unanswerable, for he said nothing in return.

For another moment there was silence, and master and man eyed each other doubtfully; then the former turned on his heel with a growl.

"I give ye till after tea," he said roughly—"nae langer. I'll harbour nae thieves under *ma* roof."

He followed his wife into the house, and the girl and boy were left together.

They stood, looking each on the ground, neither

knowing what to say to the other. Meggie was crying.

Presently she raised her head, as though struck by a sudden thought, threw back her curly hair, and said, her childish voice trembling, and the tears still wet upon her cheeks—

"Mebbe Sal's ta'en it?"

"Nay," answered the boy, with a sullen setting of the features, which may have been caused by a strong attempt to keep back his own tears—"how could she, when she's a-bed in the Union?"

"Ay, I'd forgettin' that," answered Meggie; and she began to cry again.

"Canna ye give over?" exclaimed the boy, with an impatient movement. "If ye think it's me, as I ken ye do, I want none o' yer tears."

"I dinna *want* to think 't, Nick," she said, almost humbly; "but as naebody else kent but you and me, I dinna ken *what* to think! Eh, but I wish it had niver been fund at arl!"

The sobs burst out again, and she covered her face with her pinafore.

In spite of his resentment at her distrust, Nick's heart was touched by his companion's grief.

"Dinna greet, lass," he said awkwardly. "The goold's gone and canna be got back; sae what's t' use o' cryin'? Gan and get yer tea."

Meggie went slowly, with her pinafore still at her eyes.

There seemed no more to be said, and tea must be ready by now.

Meggie never thought of doing without her tea, unhappy though she was. It takes a very crushing grief indeed to affect a healthy appetite.

But Nick did not follow her. It was not that his tea-time feelings were absent either, in spite of his calamity. But he shrank from going into the kitchen under the circumstances. Pride and prudence alike forbade it.

He looked behind him. Viper had lingered, and was looking up at him, wagging her tail inquiringly. For Viper, also, knew that it was tea-time, and wondered what her master could mean by lingering. Nick raised his hand, and motioned towards the house.

"Had awa', lass!" he cried, in a commanding voice, which, nevertheless, was too husky to carry far. "Had awa' in, it's tea-time!"

Viper hesitated to obey the first order, unwilling to go without her master; but at the second she dropped her tail and slunk away.

Nick waited till she was out of sight. Then he sat down on a stone and covered his face with his hands.

Poor fellow, he would not give way as long as even the dog was there; but now that he was quite alone, the fancied manhood of his sixteen years and six months (to give him the benefit of the whole tale) was utterly unable to bear him up under the crushing load of trouble which had so suddenly fallen upon him. It seemed so hard, so very hard that having tried his utmost to do his duty according

to his lights, he should have to suffer exactly as though he had not done it. Nay, if he had insisted on keeping silence, Meg might have consented, and then he might at the same time have enjoyed the money and escaped all blame. For Nick only thought of the blame of his fellows, the condemnation of his own conscience, which might have ensued, being altogether left out of the reckoning just then.

He had done well and had suffered for it. It seemed to him that, under the circumstances, he might just as well, nay better, have done ill. This of course was short-sighted. But the stinging sense of injustice often causes this mental defect, especially in the inexperienced and the ignorant.

The lad's spirit was for the time utterly broken. It seemed to him useless to struggle against what he took for this new buffet of an adverse fate. He had lost his home once, and now he was to lose it again. For Nick, though he had questioned his master's ability to imprison him, had but little doubt that he *could* do so if he wished. At best, he would be hunted out of Bellister with more hard words. Of what use, then, to await his doom?

No one believed in him. He was a dog with a bad name—not of his own earning, indeed, but what of that? He was sure to be "hanged" in any case, whatever he did. Better take his fate into his own hands and go at once.

And yet he hesitated.

Poor, wounded, homeless lad! He had already

sought his fortune in the wide world, and failed to find it. He had proved the world's unkindness to those who possess no key of riches, honour, or wit wherewith to open its fast-closed door; and he shrank from again leaving the only haven which had ever given him shelter.

No wonder he lost heart, sitting there, as it were, on the threshold of home, knowing all the time that he had no choice but to leave it.

The sun was sinking low in the west. Its rays still fell on the grey ruins among which he sat; but already the trooping of colours, which attends the departure of the king of day, had begun.

Weary with misery, the boy sat with his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, vacantly watching the pageant.

Of its beauty he had no thought. It was simply sunset to him, and he knew that at sunset, at that particular season of the year, John Ridley generally rose from the tea-table and went out.

"I'll gie ye till after tea—nae langer," he had said; and Nick knew that the master would keep his word.

The setting of the sun, therefore, must be the signal for him to turn his back on Bellister.

The golden ball was touching the brown moors now, which rolled away to the west. The withered heather was turning to rich russet under his beams. The sky, immediately above, was like a luminous lake of yellowish green, flecked with little wavelets of scarlet. Over that was a broad margin of deep

purplish grey, shading off into the neutral tints which the sky had worn for the greater part of the day.

The jackdaws were coming home to roost overhead in the crevices of the ruined walls. They made dark spots of inky blackness, as they winged their way against the delicate clearness of the sunset.

"*A-lack! Poor Jack! A-lack!*" they seemed to cry out to the boy, who sat, more homeless than they, among the ruins where they lived. Their voices, always querulous and complaining, sounded more so than ever, that evening, or so it appeared to Nick. What were they saying?

"*A-lack! The sack! The sack!*" Was it in pity or derision?

The boy, all his nerves on edge, could bear the sound no longer. It was all too true that he had "got the sack," as he told himself; but he did not want the jackdaws to tell him so. He would go without waiting for the sun to set. After all, what was the use of waiting? Better go and have done with it.

So, turning his back on the old castle, on the jackdaws which inhabited the ruins, and the people who lived in the house, he ran down the green hill, along the loaning, and into the road.

He did not once look back, for his eyes were blinded with tears and a lump was in his throat. That, however, did not hinder him hearing the querulous voices calling after him.

"Poor Jack! A-lack! The sack! Come back! Come back!"

But for all the jackdaws' calling Nick did not come back.

CHAPTER XIII.

HIS ONLY FRIEND.

To the north of the little town of Haltwhistle, following a straight course over hill and dale, over dark moors, and green hollows, through which clear brown burns slide babbling to the Tyne, you may see a broken wall. It draws a black, jagged line against the sky, here clear and well-defined, there full of interruptions and patchings of modern farm-fences, breaking off, beginning again, but leaving its traces straight across the narrow neck of our island between Tyne and Solway.

This is the great Roman wall of Hadrian, the second barrier which our mighty conquerors built to keep the unvanquished "barbarians" of the North from overrunning the vanquished South.*

It was towards this wall that Nick was making his way, when the sun set, that evening, over Bellister.

He had not got very far by then, it is true, not even quite so far as the river Tyne, which, as we already know, flows between the old castle and the

* The first was Agricola's line of forts between the Firths of Forth and Clyde.

little town of Haltwhistle. The lights in the shops and houses, which edge the one long street, looked cheerful and inviting as Nick trudged past. But he had no more intention of stopping at any of them than he had on that other evening when we first made his acquaintance.

Shops and houses may be very inviting to those who have money in their pockets and friends by the fireside to welcome them. But when a man has neither, there is no one to ask him in, or to bid him welcome when he gets there. And so Nick, who was penniless and friendless, went by without a pause.

He glanced at the Union as he passed, that last harbour of refuge for the poor, the homeless, and the worn-out; but neither at its unattractive door had he the least intention of stopping. There was an inmate there already who kept him out more effectually than bars or bolts.

Tramping Sal was inside the Union, and that was enough for Nick.

A mother's presence, which makes the humblest place home for most lads, had the contrary effect on this poor wanderer.

So the workhouse was left behind as well as the more homelike houses, and, turning his back on the town, Nick crossed the bridge spanning the burn, which forms its north-eastern boundary, and took his way upward to the hills.

He had no distinct plan in his mind as to his future. All he could think of, just then, was to get

as far as possible from Bellister, and then find a corner into which to creep for the night.

There was a shelter for sheep, built up against the ancient wall, some miles north of Haltwhistle, which the homeless lad seemed to see before his minds' eye as he tramped up the stony road. He had been there several times already, for his master had sheep grazing in that direction during the summer; and more than once Nick had taken shelter within the turf-roofed corner, designed to accommodate the shepherd attending the sheep should a storm break during his stay. This rough shed would, he thought, do for him to hide his head in on this first night of homeless wandering.

The darkness of a January night fell upon the wild moorland a good while before the goal was reached. Only a little light lingered here and there, eked out by the patches of snow blown beneath the heather bushes, and where the last remains of the sunset was focussed by some peat-moss pool, looking like a little bit of clear, yellow, transparent glass let into a big dark frame. These pools looked up at Nick, like winking eyes, as he followed the windings of the road, now opening upon, now shutting themselves away from his sight. But he needed no light to show him his way, nor yet a track, for, presently, he left the stony hill-road and struck across the heather, trudging steadily on with the directness of those who have known the moors from infancy.

After a while, as he knew, the moon would rise; but he was in no hurry for its appearance. The

twilight, which wrapped him about as with a cloak, and hid from him shame and unkindness, was more congenial to his sore heart just then.

Presently he began to take notice, in spite of his sad thoughts, of something more material. This was a solitary track of footsteps going on in front of him towards the wall. At times, where the snow had escaped the dispersing breath of the wind, these were plainly to be seen, even in the uncertain light. Then again, where the heather was blown bare, the track was interrupted. But it always began again with the patches of snow.

Why Nick should take notice of these footsteps he hardly knew; but presently it struck him that he was connecting them with a memory of similar prints seen at some particular time.

When could this have been, and where were they? He puzzled over this question for a time in a half-interested manner; then it suddenly flashed on him that, on the afternoon of that very same day, he had seen just such a track, without noticing it, when he was leading John Ridley to the hiding-place of the treasure which had so mysteriously disappeared. These steps, he now felt convinced, might have given the clue to the mystery. If only he had noticed them at the time, the true thief might have been tracked out. For Nick remembered that there had been no snow upon the ground when he had paid his nocturnal visit to the ruins, two nights previously, consequently the footprints which he had seen could not have been his own.

The blood rushed to his face as he thought of the clue which he had missed, and with it the chance of clearing himself.

He stopped dead for a minute upon his way, half turned as though to go back, and then checked himself. For another thought straightway followed the first, as the cloud follows the flash of sunlight along a hillside, chilling his hot blood with its cold shadow. His chance was gone. The clue, which might have been followed up two or three hours earlier, was gone now. That single track of footprints must have been completely obliterated by those of the Ridley family, led by himself, when they visited the ruined keep during the afternoon.

Nick looked sadly at the faint traces of the footsteps which were before him where the snow lay, lightly drifted in thin white patches, at the roots of the heather bushes upon the moor.

He could hardly see them at all now, for the darkness was growing thicker, and even the snow was not enough to make more than a feeble glimmer in the gathering gloom. He was glad that he could not see them; they reminded him so painfully of those other footprints which *might* have meant so much to him if, in his blind, blundering folly, he had not helped to trample them out.

Well, it was too late now. The chance was gone for good and all. There was no use in thinking of it.

Yet, it need hardly be said to those who know anything of human nature, that, in spite of his

philosophy, Nick went on thinking. Who could have made those footprints leading so directly to the hiding-hole of the treasure at Bellister Castle? The question was certainly one of absorbing interest, just then, especially to poor Nick. He felt no doubt at all that the maker of them was the thief; and he felt that even if he could prove the point to his own satisfaction only, it would be some slight consolation.

He would know whom to blame then, and that has always been a satisfaction in even the worst troubles ever since the days when Adam was turned out of Eden, and relieved his feelings by blaming Eve.

Bit by bit the boy's mind began to go over the ground of the last few days. He remembered the shadow he fancied he had seen among the ruins on the night in question, and which he had hastily decided was but the effect of a cloud covering the moon. That, possibly, was the thief who had gone before him after the treasure, been frightened away by his coming, and had afterwards returned to take it away.

But who was this thief?

Memory led him a little further in another direction. He went back to the afternoon when Meggie and he had made the discovery. Only he and the girl had shared the secret. Could the culprit be Meggie herself?

But the boy's heart and understanding alike rejected the idea.

It was evident that Meggie knew nothing about the matter.

Who then?

Surely some one had almost run against them as they left the ruins. Who was it?

Nick taxed his memory to recollect.

Mrs. Ridley had come home just then, but it was not she. The boy remembered quite well to have seen her toiling up the hill with her market-basket. It was—— Ha, he had it at last! It was Teddy; and Teddy had started and looked uncomfortable.

Could it be that the son of the house had been loitering among the ruins, had seen them find the box and count over the gold, and had ended by appropriating it?

Again a wave of heat rushed over Nick as the thought came, and, this time, it remained with him, and his blood continued to boil. Teddy had been absent since before breakfast. He had been sent by his father on an errand to a place not far from where Nick now was. The message had been given to him overnight, and he had not returned when the loss was discovered. Though the evidence was but slight, the more he thought of it the more convinced did Nick feel that, at length, he had hit on the culprit.

Again he stopped, the impulse strong upon him to return and accuse Teddy to the Ridleys. But he soon went on again. Who would believe him, supposing he did? Who would take his word against Teddy's, especially the lad's own father?

Teddy belonged to a respectable family, while he, Nick, was a nameless nobody.

No, John Ridley's son might be to blame a hundred times over, but the guilt would never be brought to his door.

Grinding his teeth with impotent rage, the boy stumbled forward among the tussocks of grass and heather, heedless, in his resentment and pain, where he was going, goaded by the feeling that all the world was against him, and he alone against the world.

The cold night breeze rustled among the stiff rushes and the faded heather, and swept away with a moan as of a being in pain. It rudely ruffled the lad's shock head as it passed, and made a clutch at his rusty cap. Well, why not? He was an outcast from society, and there was nobody in the world to care what happened to him.

"Let's hit him, he's down." This is what, as it seemed to poor Nick, all creation was saying.

But, suddenly, another and a different sort of rustling came to his ears. A quick, panting sound came nearer and nearer. The ice-pools and snow-patches crackled as though under little scrampling feet, and out of the gloom rushed something frenzied, uttering short, quick barks and funny little squeaks as it leaped about him.

"Why, Viper, lass, is't thoo? Thoo's niver followed me arl this way, hast tha'? What garr'd thee leave them arl at Bellister, where thoo's plenty to eat and a warm bed, to come after pier Nick,

who's naught to gie thee at arl? Eh, Viper, Viper, thoo's a little fool, but——"

Here the boy stopped, for a choking feeling had come in his throat.

Kneeling down in the damp heather he took the dog in his arms, and, as he felt her tongue upon his cheeks, the tears, which even in that first agony of grief and shame and rage he had not shed, fell fast and thick upon her coat.

It was as though something had thawed his heart and was relieving the terrible weight of trouble which oppressed it. Nor were they tears of anger and bitterness. The knowledge that one heart beat for him, that one creature cared for him and was willing to follow him into banishment, had opened a well-spring of tenderness within the boy which had seldom been touched before.

After all, he was not utterly alone. He had one friend in the hard, cold world. What mattered it to him, just then, that his friend was only a dog?

CHAPTER XIV.

UNDER THE ROMAN WALL.

By the time that Nick had finished sobbing his heart out over Viper, and she had relieved her feelings at finding him again, by all those affectionate demonstrations common to dogs of an unreserved nature, the moon was beginning to rise.

She came up over the dark rim of the eastern horizon, flooding the moors with light. She sought out the moss-pools which had looked their last at the setting day, and turned them into silver mirrors for the night. She touched the shallow cupfuls of water in the hollows of the rocks over which the frost had had power to spin a coating of thin ice, and made them look like mother-o'-pearl. And as for the ice-drops on rushes and heather, the wind-drifted snow and the unthawed rime, I know not what charm she wrought on them all, by which to turn the lonely moor into an enchanted land, glistening with gems and silver. Even the tears on poor Nick's face and his friend's rough coat were changed to sparkling diamonds.

But a rough Northumbrian lad like Nick is not of the sort to be deceived by any such sorcery. The diamonds were no diamonds to him, but tears, of which, now that the darkness under whose cover he had shed them was gone, he began to feel heartily ashamed. Dashing them away in scorn, he rose from the ground, and, followed by Viper, who dropped into her place of humble attendant again as naturally as though nothing had happened, he went on his way.

He was quite close to the wall by now. He could see its broken line dark against the sky.

Grim and inhospitable, indeed, it looked, and not in the least as though any one better than a sheep or fox could find there a lodging for the night.

But Nick knew what he was about, and, presently, found the shielding he was in search of. This had been made in an angle of the wall, where formerly there had, evidently, been a turret or gateway. The turf which roofed in this rude shelter had kept the interior fairly dry, and the wall above, which was here tolerably perfect, was a fair protection from the keen north wind. Once inside the hut, therefore, Nick was not altogether uncomfortable. He shook up and turned the bed of heather which he had made last time he was there, and, with Viper nestled close beside him, he lay down to sleep.

It may be thought that sleep, which is often coy, even with those who woo her on beds of down, would refuse to come to this homeless lad on his rough couch of heather. But this was not the case with Nick that night. Miserable outcast though he was, without prospects of any kind, without money, or food, or a friend in the world, excepting a mongrel dog, he had no sooner lain down than sleep came to him without even waiting to be asked.

How long he slept he could not have told you, but he was suddenly awakened by a low growl from his little companion. By a special telegraphic message, such as had often passed between them before, the boy made the dog understand that he wished her to be quiet.

She obeyed at once, as well-trained creatures will, only showing her excitement by quivering all over her wiry little body, as she crouched on the heather beside him, encircled by his arm.

Feeling sure that something or somebody was in the neighbourhood, Nick raised himself on his elbow and looked out. He had no difficulty in doing this, for there was no door to the hut, if so the little shelter might be called, and, by moving his head a very little way, he could distinctly see the long, broken line of the ancient wall stretching away from him, dark in the flood of moonlight which lay in front.

Yes, some one was there, sure enough. It was *some one*, not *something*, for Nick could see the dark, upright figure of a human being coming nearer across the field of light.

What could anybody want here at night? wondered Nick. He was here himself, certainly; but it was hardly probable that a second homeless wanderer should be making for the rough bedroom where he was lodged.

Restraining his quivering little companion by the warning pressure of his arm, the boy watched the approaching figure, much as Robinson Crusoe on his desert island might have watched the approach of Man Friday, when he had believed himself to be the only inhabitant of his solitude.

He was not afraid. He was only intensely curious.

The figure came nearer. He could see now that it was a lad of about his own age, though not so tall. The face, however, was turned from the light, and he failed to distinguish whether or not it belonged to a stranger.

When the lad came to within a few yards of the hut he stopped short, looked about for a minute or two, as though to make sure of some landmarks, and then stooped down under the shadow of the wall.

Nick could not see him so distinctly now; in fact he could hardly see him at all, for the moon by this time had passed the zenith, and shone from such a point as to throw this part of the wall into deep shade. It seemed, however, from his movements that the new-comer was in search of something. And, presently, it appeared that he had found what he wanted, for he came out into the moonlight again holding some object in his hand.

The light shone upon his face this time, and Nick felt the angry blood rush from his heart to his brain as he recognized Teddy Ridley. Viper seemed to have made this discovery as well; but it had not the effect on her which it had on Nick. For she saw in him only one of the familiar inmates of her home circle—no personal friend, indeed, of her own, but still a creature to be tolerated because he belonged to Bellister. To the terrier he was not a hated enemy who had taken from him his all, as he was to the boy. For dogs, wise and sympathetic though they are, can only judge of men as they themselves have proved them. And Viper, though she had never loved Teddy, had not yet learnt to hate him.

It was, consequently, the boy now who required restraining rather than the dog.

The blind, passionate impulse to fly at his enemy's throat and have it out with him there and then, which swayed Nick in that moment of recognition, was only held back by the pressing need of finding out what Teddy was about. Nick's intuition connected the presence of the other lad in such a place and at such an hour with the disappearance of the treasure, and his common sense told him that, if possible, conviction should precede accusation and punishment.

It did not take him long to find out, however, what Teddy held in his hand.

It was nothing more nor less than the rusty iron box which had contained the gold.

That it contained none of it now Nick discovered almost in the same moment. For Teddy, apparently, had taken the box from the place where he had hid it for the express purpose of making sure that no stray coin was left at the bottom. He held it lid downwards as he stood there in the moonlight, shook it, and struck it with his hand, and was just about to replace it in its nook in the wall when, swift as an avenging flash, some one sprang out upon him, struck him a violent blow, and dragged him to the ground.

You, readers, know, of course, that this was Nick, but Teddy was less well-informed. He had been utterly unaware of the presence there of the lad whom he had wronged, and the sudden attack paralyzed him.

The moon, too, at that moment went under a

passing cloud, so that he could only feel without being able to see.

One shrill cry pealed over the lonely moor, and then, but for the sound of hard breathing and the growling of the terrier as she sprang bewildered around the combatants, all was still.

Then the moon came out again, and Teddy, who was struggling feebly to free himself, as he lay on his back upon the heather, saw above him the face of Nick, his father's servant-lad. He had never seen him look so before.

The usually good-natured, inoffensive expression of the boy who had been the drudge and butt of the Bellister family, had changed to a look of fierce, determined resentment. Strong passion had utterly transformed the features, and brought out such an expression as may be seen on the face of criminals in the moment of committing some awful crime. No wonder that Teddy quailed before the face of the lad whom he had wronged, and that his own dark-complexioned face appeared livid in the moonlight, as it looked up, wide-eyed with a great fear, from the withered heather.

"For pity's sake, Nick," he gasped at length, hardly able to get out the words for the pressure on throat and chest, "dinna murder me right off! What have I done to——"

"What ha' ye done, ye villain ye?" growled Nick, his voice thick with passion. "Ye needn't try to deceive me. Ye've ruined me, that's what ye've done. Gi'e me back what ye took, and let them

arl ken at Bellister who t' real thief is, and then, mebbe, I might think aboot sparin' ye. If not, I swear to——"

But Nick got no further.

During the above parley he had, presumedly, to some extent relaxed his hold on Teddy. At all events, a sudden supreme effort on the part of the latter allowed him to throw off his assailant and spring to his feet.

This time it was Nick who was taken by surprise, and he had just time to rise in his turn before the other lad turned the tables by assuming the offensive.

It was terrible in the moonlight to see the two lads, one of them almost mad with the thirst for revenge, the other desperate with the desire to overcome an adversary from whom he knew he had nothing to hope, clasped together in a death-like grip.

They strained, they struggled, they swayed backwards and forwards with parted lips and breath coming hot and fast in each other's faces, while the terrier leaped round them, not yet understanding this strife between house-mates, yet instinctively siding with the one she loved best.

More than once Teddy felt her sharp little teeth meet in his legs, as Viper tried her small best to pull him off her friend, and he growled a curse under his breath, as a lion might growl at a gnat which he cannot reach.

Nick was the taller and more wiry of the two,

but Teddy was both strong and active; and the easy victory which the former had been able to obtain over the latter in the old days when they were both small boys, was no longer possible. Though Nick had recovered his health and strength to a great degree, his illness, together with the half year of wandering, during which he had often had hardly enough food to keep soul and body together, had deprived him of some of the vigour which should have been his.

He breathed hard, and, cold though the night was, the perspiration rained down his face. But, presently, he felt Teddy's efforts slacken; he pushed him nearer and nearer towards the wall, with the mad desire to dash him against it, if possible—a desire which Teddy seemed to be aware of, and to resist with all his remaining powers. Just so, with passion and mutual hatred no less, might Roman and barbarian have striven for the mastery under that very wall in the days of long ago.

The combatants were within a few yards of the wall, and already its shadow lay dark upon their struggling figures, when something happened which put a sudden end to the conflict.

Viper, who, as we have seen, had enrolled herself as the ally of her friend, though much in the dark as to the cause of the fray, as loving creatures of her sex are very apt to do, made, just then, a specially furious onslaught upon Teddy. She got her teeth well into the trouser and stocking and flesh of his left ankle, planted her own feet firmly

upon the ground, and tugged with all her might. The result was that Teddy, already hard put to to keep his feet, had one of them pulled from under him, and went down upon his back, as though he had been felled, dragging Nick after him.

Nick eagerly set his knee on the breast of his fallen enemy so as to prevent his rising again. But he was not long in finding out that Teddy made no effort whatever to do so. He lay, still and limp, as though he had been stunned, and though Nick could not see his face for the shadow of the wall, he had no difficulty in discovering that the lad was quite unconscious.

After waiting for a few minutes to see whether he would revive, he took hold of his vanquished enemy under the arms, and dragged him out into the moonlight.

Sure enough the face was that of an unconscious being. It was ghastly white. The eyes were open, indeed, but there was no speculation in them, as they stared up at the night sky, where the moon-boat was riding triumphantly in the blue. A thin trickle of blood came from the parted lips, which were still drawn back from the white teeth, as they had been in the struggle of a minute before.

Nick felt his hot blood run suddenly cold. The joy of victory ceased to make his heart leap. A great fear took possession of him, as the silence of the night, broken a while by the struggle, settled down again over the solitary moor. To Nick it

was a silence tingling with one great question, "Is he dead?"

He turned the lad over. There was a bloody place at the back of his head, and the dark hair was sticky with the oozing drops.

Nick looked at his own hand and shuddered to see it red in the moonlight.

"Viper," he whispered, as the dog came whining to him, after sniffing at the fallen Teddy—"Viper, lass, I doot—I doot we've kilt him!"

CHAPTER XV.

GREYHOUND GEORDIE.

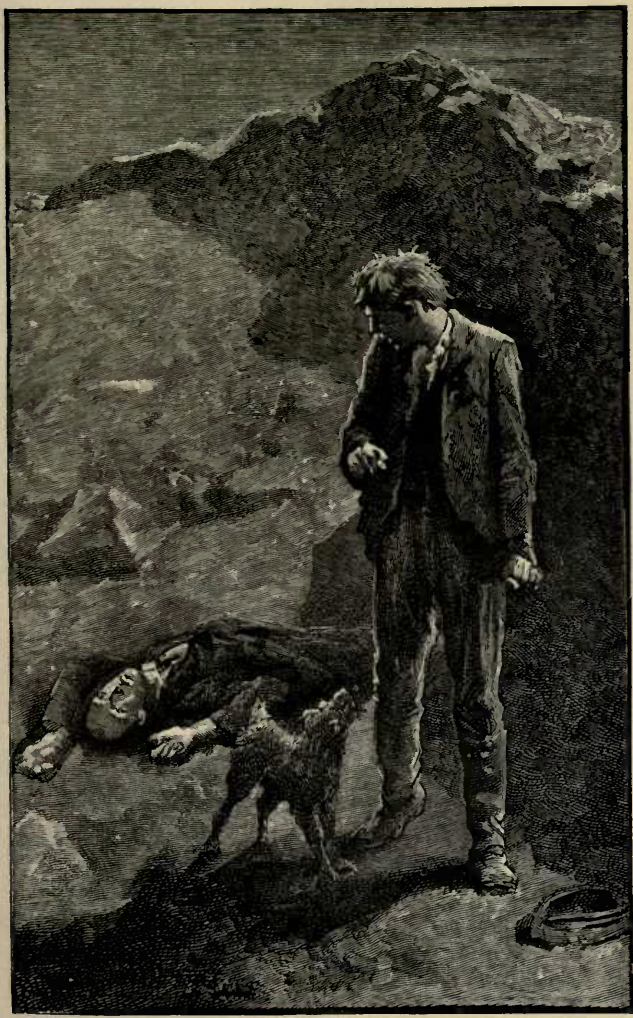
WHAT was to be done now?

A panic took hold of John Ridley's servant-lad, as he realized what that wild fit of passion which had possessed him had resulted in.

He had had a bad name before through no fault of his own. It had come down to him, ready-made and at second-hand, derived from his unknown parents.

But he had inherited something besides—wild, untamed passions, which, given way to, had caused him to earn for himself that bad name of which before he had been the innocent legatee.

He deserved it now. He was a criminal on his own account, and he felt it, as he stood there,



"VIPER, LASS, I DOOT—I DOOT WE'VE KILT HIM!"

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trembling all over, looking down, in a half-fascinated sort of way, on that white face and those wide eyes, which again stared up at him in the wintry moonlight from the dark heather at his feet.

What would people call him *now*, if the terrible thing which he feared were really a fact? No wonder the lad shivered as he looked at what he had done, and heard the answer to that question booming in his ears.

And then there was no one to witness that he had not intended it. In fact, he hardly knew himself whether he had intended it or not, so fiercely had passion swayed him, so blind and deaf and unconscious of everything else had he been, save how best to punish Teddy for the injury he had received.

And what was to be done now?

If that thing upon the heather were really a dead body, Nick knew well enough what would be done to him should the deed be traced to his hand. He already felt a tightening of the throat, as he thought upon the awful punishment for crimes such as this.

He dared not go and seek for help, for that would be to tempt the fate he dreaded. He must hide away his victim, he thought, as quickly as possible, and then put all the space he could between himself and what was now to him as an accursed spot.

Ay, the thing at his feet must be hidden; that was the first thing to do. If it were really dead, then the longer it was in being found, the better

for him. If, on the other hand, there were still life, it was still more important that it should not be left to lie there exposed to the cold night air, but be placed under shelter to come to itself at leisure.

Shuddering all the time, Nick did his little best to convince himself that the latter view was the correct one, but failed miserably. He had never come near a dead body in all his life, and his young flesh shrank from the examination, causing it to be but imperfect. He got a little water in his hand and moistened the lips and forehead; he felt the heart, but could distinguish no signs of life. Then, shuddering still more strongly, he lifted the body by the shoulders, and, dragging it inside the turfed shelter in the corner of the shielding, he laid it upon the bed of heather where he himself had lain so shortly before.

As he was in the act of finishing this task, a loud noise outside brought his heart into his mouth.

Something was snorting and blowing close by the entrance, and Viper was barking violently.

Nick thought that his fate was upon him. But, an instant after, he saw what it was.

Two rough-coated hillside ponies, which are often left to run out on these upland pastures during the whole of the winter, had had their curiosity aroused on the subject of Viper, and had come to make observations, as horses and cattle are fond of doing, concerning the natural history of dogs.

But Viper's barking had interrupted their studies,

and now, with heads in the air and manes and tails streaming beneath them, the timid observers were off over the moorland, their hoofs thundering on the frozen ground, and Viper in full cry behind them.

But the incident had not only shaken still more Nick's already quivering nerves, but the noise suggested betrayal. It was just possible that some shepherd might be out on the moors, who, hearing a dog, might come to see that it was about no unlawful business, such as sheep-hunting.

Viper must be called off at once, and the two of them must make what haste they could to escape from a dangerous neighbourhood.

Whistling to the terrier, who instantly returned, having, indeed, only been employing her time, while her master was busy, in what she considered a little harmless by-play, Nick crossed the wall at one of its countless gaps, and, sometimes running, sometimes walking, made the best of his way northward.

While the moonlight lasted he made good progress, but, soon after leaving the wall behind him, the moon touched the western horizon, and slowly slid behind it, leaving the moor, except for the glimmering shimmer of the thinly sprinkled snow, in darkness. Yet the boy and dog plodded on, now falling into a peat bog, now stumbling over tussocks of moor-grass or bushes of heather, but always getting up again and pressing forward as determinately as ever, till the wintry dawn began

to whiten the sky behind them away to the south-east. By this time both were so weary that the sight of a partly cut haystack in a field near the edge of the moor was too much for them to resist. Nick and his little comrade crept into the gap made by the hay-spade, covered themselves with the hay, and, despite all that had happened, were soon fast asleep again.

They slept on till the sun was high in the frosty blue dome which over-arched the sparkling world, and might have slept till sunset came round again had it not been for hunger. But, however it may be with other pangs, those of an empty stomach speak loudly enough to chase away the deepest and sweetest sleep. And, by the time that noon was past, both Viper and her master were acutely conscious that neither tea nor supper had been tasted the evening before, and that breakfast for them was not.

Nick sat up, struggled out from his nest of hay, shook the seeds and stalks from his hair and clothes, and, calling to his bedfellow, set out on the tramp again.

The terrors of first awakening from sleep after a calamity have been often described, and are very real and awful. Yet even these mental horrors are apt to be obscured by physical suffering of a clamorous nature. This explanation may be accepted as the reason why Nick thought less of what had happened the night before than he might otherwise have done by reason of the hunger-pangs which were tormenting him.

To get food had become a more pressing need even than to get away from the neighbourhood of the Roman wall. But food in January among the hills and moors of the Borders is not very easy to get.

In spite of that haystack the pair had to walk a long time before seeing any farmstead to which it might belong, and when, at length, the farmstead was sighted, the accompanying sight of a crowd before the door and a cattle-sale in progress warned Nick to keep his distance.

A policeman was on duty about the premises, and of policemen poor Nick now felt that he must henceforth be afraid.

Accordingly, he and his companion gave the farmstead a wide berth, and, turning into a rough road which crossed another wild piece of country, they told themselves that as breakfast had been done without, so must dinner also.

But though a man may tell himself these sort of things, his body is not always obedient to his mind. Fasting for twenty-four hours at a stretch, when on active exercise in the open air, is more than can be reasonably required from anybody, especially when that body belongs to a boy who has not done growing. Therefore, before he had gone more than a mile or two from the farm where he had been disappointed of his dinner, Nick's body, long-suffering and serviceable though it was, began to rebel against the hardness with which it was treated. Walking became more and more difficult.

The view began to look misty in spite of the frosty sunshine. The hills and rocks and heather appeared to be moving further and further towards a more and more distant horizon, till, at last, all the world took to spinning round, and Nick, so as to go in safety with it, was fain to sit down on the first best stone by the roadside.

Viper looked at him, with her ears cocked up and her shrewish little nose in the air, as much as to say, "What's the use of sitting down here? Neither man nor dog can make a meal off last year's heather." But, finding that her master not only took no notice of the remonstrance in her eyes, but had even hidden his face in his hands so that he could not see at all, she gave in to his fancy sufficiently to sit down by his side.

Here she disconsolately viewed the empty road for a good quarter of an hour, which is, you will allow, an unsatisfactory prospect for a hungry dog.

At the end of that time, however, she started up, all alertness, got herself into the middle of the road and crouched low, with her sharp little nose turned in the direction from which she and her master had come.

All this time Nick took no notice, and Viper was left to perform the duties of scout entirely on her own account.

After she had crouched like this for three or four minutes, she sprang briskly forward, like an arrow let loose from a bow, to meet another of her species which was coming up the road.

Now, if you had not known that both belonged to the dog tribe, you would hardly have classed the little fussy, wiry-haired terrier with the elegant-figured, long-legged creature who, with an overcoat of checked flannel, bound with red, buttoned closely round him, was walking sedately along.

The new-comer had an undercoat of glossy black, which looked like satin, a snaky tail, gracefully tip-tilted, small, well-turned head, and a long, slim nose. He held his head high, and trod the road on tiptoe as daintily as a dancing-master. He was evidently a gentleman of high distinction and breeding, in spite of the rather disreputable companion who was holding him in a leash.

Now, one does not expect to find gentlemen of distinction and breeding in the company of the disreputable. Yet, nevertheless, this is sometimes the case, and you must not think, therefore, that the pedigree of this canine aristocrat was an inch less long than it appeared to be, notwithstanding his associate. If you doubt this, you have only to look in the red-book of the greyhound family, and you will find the descent of this very member inscribed, with grandsires and grandams as many as belong to the bluest blood in the three kingdoms.

"The Laird o' Cockpen," indeed, for this was the gentleman's title, was a very distinguished personage, and known in the most prominent sporting circles on both sides of the Border.

So was his companion, for that matter; yet he

was neither distinguished, nor well-bred, no, nor even respectable, to judge by appearances.

He was a tall man of, apparently, about fifty-five or sixty, with a slouch in his shoulders and a halt in his walk. He wore clothes which very long ago had been made in a flash, sporting style, but which now were dirty, threadbare, and weather-worn. A wide-awake hat, evidently not belonging to the rest of the costume, for it was of a decidedly clerical shape, though quite as much the worse for wear as the clothes, gave the crowning touch to the whole. From under this looked a face which reminded you, somehow, of a fox, for it had the same crafty expression, alert eyes, and long, thin nose. Once upon a time the likeness was, probably, still more striking, for there was a tint still remaining in the shaggy hair, beard, and whiskers which might be called a faded russet, if you were minded to express it politely.

There were a good many lines and wrinkles on this individual's face, considerably more than should come at that time of life, unless the man has lived at a more rapid rate than is quite in accordance with respectability. Many of those were the handwriting of craft, but there were others which spoke of good nature, if they spoke the truth, and some again which revealed a caustic wit and a reckless, dare-devil lightheartedness.

This man was smoking a short clay pipe, as he came within sight of Nick and Viper, drumming the while with his fingers upon his corduroy breeches,

as though a tune were running in his head, which, but for the pipe, would have come to his lips.

At the sight of Viper he ceased this drumming and threw her a quick glance. His own dog saw her too, looked once in her direction, and then stuck his aristocratic nose in the air with marked contempt. But, as the terrier continued yelping, wriggling, and snuffing around him, he gave a short low growl, as though to say, "Keep your distance, can't you!"

When the man in the wide-awake saw Nick, he came to a standstill, looked at him, and whistled softly. Then he stooped over him, and shook him by the shoulder.

"Wake up!" he cried sharply though not unkindly. "Sleepin' by t' roadside when t' frost's astir means deein', young man."

Nick looked up vacantly into the face above him. Then a scared expression broke out of the mere vacancy, and he tried to rise.

"Wo-a, thin! Come, my lad, ye needna be flayed, whativer cause ye've got. I'm nae bobby. Bobby, indeed! Ha! ha! The force wadn't enlist Greyhound Geordie, even if he had a fancy to try that sitivation, which he *hasn't*. Come, what ails ye that ye canna stand staight? Drink, eh?"

He sank his voice, winked disagreeably with his foxy eyes, and poked the boy in the ribs.

"Nay, it's *meat*, I think—or, rayther, the want on't," answered Nick, feebly, with a faint smile. He did not resent the imputation as a more respectably

brought-up lad would have done; though, indeed, to give poor Nick his due, he had never yet tasted spirits in all his life, and that for a very good reason, though one quite without merit to himself.

"Starvin'? Pier bairn!" was the compassionate rejoinder. "Well, I haven't mickle wi' me—nobbut a bit bottle o' whusky and a crust o' bread, but ye're welcome to a share. I was just thinkin' o' havin' a bite and a sup mysel', for it's past dinner-time. Here"—he divided a piece of bread and handed half to Nick, by whose side he had seated himself, together with a battered flask,—"here, put yersel' outside this, and ye'll feel a deal better."

The famished boy took a pull at the flask. It seemed to him like drinking in warmth and comfort, as the strong spirit ran like fire through his veins. Then he took a few ravenous mouthfuls of the bread.

But, as he ate, there came a low whine at his side, a cold nose was inserted under his arm, and a pair of supplicating, bright eyes looked into his.

Nick broke off the half of his own share and gave it to his faithful little companion, who lay down with it between her paws, and began to gnaw at it quite as greedily as her master.

The Laird o' Cockpen, who had sat down on his haunches, looked on disdainfully.

"Yer dorg's empty and arl, eh?" remarked the man by Nick's side, who had, meanwhile, emptied the flask, which the latter had returned to him.

"Ay, she's had time to be," answered Nick, with his mouth full.

"How long?" asked the Laird's master.

"We've eaten nowt since twelve o'clock yesterday."

"Midnight?"

"No, noon.

"Whew-w-w!" whistled the other. "That's a gey bit to fast. Nae wonder t' clock's run doon."

Nick looked at the speaker, wondering what he meant.

"T' clock's run doon; she canna gan unless ye wind her up. Meat, drink, and sleep keep the wheels o' life gannin', my lad. Eh?"

Nick saw the meaning now, and smiled.

The man dusted the crumbs from his knees and handed the remains of his bread to his companion.

"I've had enough to keep *me* gannin' till suppertime," he said.

"Yer dorg 'll, mebbe, want it?" inquired Nick, looking wistfully at the offered piece.

"Nay," was the answer. "Cockpen winna eat dry bread. He's over sarcy for that. Ye can see for yersel', if ye like."

He broke off a corner and offered it to the greyhound, who got up slowly, smelt at it, and then moved off again, with his aristocratic nose in the air.

Nick laughed. The meat and drink were doing their work for him. A little colour had come back into his cheeks.

"Viper's not sae prood," he said, as the terrier snapped up the rejected morsel.

"Nay, but then she's yan o' t' commonality, like ye and me, lad," answered the greyhound's master, with a smile at his dog, betraying pride of another kind. "He's a real swell, is the Laird."

But, apparently, the contemptuous aristocrat, though he might refuse on his own account, objected to see the rejected morsel accepted by some one else. He looked angrily Viper-wards, and uttered another low growl.

"Mebbe, they'll fight?" asked Nick, made uneasy in the midst of the enjoyment of his extra share of bread by the danger of his dog.

"Fight? Nay, Cockpen niver attacks li'le tykes like yon, least of arl t' womenfolk. He's over weel bred for that. See him wi' yan o' his own size and sex now—eh, but he disn't giv them mickle chance!"

And again he looked at his dog with the pride of possession, and chuckled delightedly, as though at some rare recollection.

"Nay," he went on, presently, still looking at the dogs, who were striking up a distant acquaintance at the point of the nose, "the Laird niver's aught but ceevil wi' femmels. He's better nor maist men that way. Why, I mysel' haven't arlways been able to keep my hands off them when impidence has been offered, but I've niver seen Cockpen sae mickle as put a tooth into yan o' the sex, however impident she might be. And, eh,

man, but of all impidence there's nane to even that o' a femmel when she's given that way! Ay, them that's had experience kens."

Another recollection, and a less pleasant one, curled the speaker's lips as he said this.

"But, come, we'd better be movin' on," he resumed presently, after watching the dogs a while longer. "It's over cauld to sit lang, and my lodgin's movin' while I sit still. I've nae time to lose if I want to be up wi' the roof-tree afore neet. Where are ye bound for, lad?"

The man had risen, as he spoke, and taken the leash of his dog, which he had dropped during the rest, again into his hand.

"I diven't ken," answered Nick, drearily.

"Eh, but that's queer! It's a waste o' time, is the trampin', unless it's to tak' ye somewhere—unless ye're anxious just to get over the ground?" said Geordie, with a queer look at Nick, who, also, was now on his feet. "But there, naebody kens better nor folk like me, that questions isn't always agreeable. Ye were gannin' this way afore. We'd joost as weel gan in company sae lang's our way's t' same. Eh?"

He did not wait for an answer, and, indeed, no words were necessary; for Nick, whose walking powers were again available, was already trudging along by the side of his new companion.

CHAPTER XVI.

POT-LUCK.

THE afternoon was waning by now, and, as the quartette reached the edge of the moor and entered upon lower lands where grew the rowan, the birch, and the plane-tree, the sun set.

After walking on for another half-hour through the deepening red of the winter's evening, they reached a place where the lane which they were following crossed a broad high-road.

A sign-post stood just at the corner of the rough dry dyke, or wall of stones put together without mortar, which fenced off the latter from the neighbouring fields. At the foot of this Greyhound Geordie came to a stop, pausing to read the names on the crossbars by the dying light of the sunset. Its sombre red fell on this upturned face, brightening the faded russet of the rugged beard and unkempt hair, and lending a fresher tint to the wrinkled skin than it naturally possessed. It showed out the profile against the shades which were gathering below, giving it the distinctness of a silhouette, emphasizing every line.

Nick stood watching him, wondering who this strange man could be, and what was the business he followed.

"The letterin's none sae clear, and the light's

bad," said Geordie, presently, after a longish study of the finger-post. "Come here, my lad, thy een sud be better nor mine. Which is t' road to Bellingham?"

"That," answered Nick, promptly, pointing north-east along the highway. "Are ye goin' that way, maister?"

The man turned on him with a queer expression on his good-natured, foxy face.

"Tisn't always because folk want to walk alang a road that they ask where it leads to, lad," he answered. "I fancied ye kent as mickle. Na, na, nae Bellinghams for me. I'm bound t' other way—along here." He pointed to a by-road opposite to that by which they had come. "It says, 'To Langburn,' disn't it?"

"Ay. But ye canna reach Langburn to-neet; it says 'fifteen mile.'"

"Nor I diven't want to, my lad. My lodgin's not sae far to seek as yon, unless the Miller's gone a deal quicker than ordiner," he added, with a twinkle in his sly eyes. "I reckon he'll have come to a halt aboot a mile doon there." He pointed again to the lane. "Come, my Laird, thoo canst tak' a bit supper by now, I fancy. Eh?"

The high-bred greyhound acknowledged the imputation by a slight wave of the tail, and a lick of his clean-cut jaws.

Nick and Viper stood at the cross-roads, watching the movements of the others.

"Our roads part here, eh?" asked Geordie,

observing that Nick did not show any signs of following. "Ye're gannin' to Bellingham, mebbe, yersel'?"

"I diven't ken," answered the lad, for the second time that day, and he looked rather wistfully towards his travelling companion.

"Ay, I forgot," was the answer, and the man paused for a moment, looking over his shoulder at the wistful face of the lad. "Mebbe we needn't part yet, eh?" he asked presently. "Ye've, mebbe, nae mair prospect o' a roof for yer head than of a bite and a sup for yer stomick, eh, young man? Well, well, if sae it be, shall we say share and share aboot, yance mair?"

The tears came into Nick's eyes. The good-natured offer touched him, for he was loth to be left alone again to pass the night, which promised to be a very cold one, shelterless and supperless.

"Ay, I'll come along wi' ye, and thank ye kindly, maister," he said.

The other nodded, and the man and boy, with the two dogs following at their heels, entered the lane, which was overhung with trees, and, already, nearly dark.

When they had gone about a mile, or, perhaps, a mile and a half, a light appeared in front of them—a red, wavering light, like that of a fire, accompanied by the smell of green wood burning.

"Didn't I say it would be nobbut a mile?" asked the Laird's master, of his companion.

It was the first word he had uttered since they had entered the lane, for the short black pipe was

back in his mouth, and its red glow had, up to now, been the only point of light to be seen in the darkness.

"T' Miller's gettin' auld, and I ken his pace. Ye see oor neet's lodgin's, lad?"

He pointed with his pipe to what lay in front, clearly discernible now in the red light of a fire of sticks and dry bracken, which burnt by the side of the road. Its leaping flames lit up the scene—the wreathes of mounting smoke, the leafless trees by the wayside, the tawny hues of the bracken which hid their feet. It cast strong lights and shadows across the lane, on the dark bulk of a tinker's van, on the white form of a horse tethered behind it, and the figures of two men and a woman, who were moving about between the van and the fire.

Over this a black pot was hanging, from which the woman lifted the lid, as Geordie spoke, releasing a savoury steam.

Both dogs, even the lordly greyhound, sniffed the delicious odour; and little Viper, whose birth did not oblige her to conceal her feelings, licked her lips vigorously.

As for her master, he felt that it would require all his self-control not to fly upon the food before it was served out.

"Weel, Geordie," called out a man's gruff voice from the circle of firelight, "so ye've landed up, min? Hoo's arl wi' ye this evenin'?"

"Geyly, Matt," answered the Laird's master.

"We've got through our business, has Cockpen and me, and——"

"So the lad turned up after arl? It's mair nor I expected," went on the man by the fire, who was throwing on more sticks, and had not yet noticed Nick's presence. "And did he bring——"

"Whisht!" said Greyhound Geordie, hastily. "Will ye niver learn yer manners, man? Diven't ye see I've brought company? Where's yer welcome, eh?"

The man by the fire turned round, showing a face redder even than the firelight quite accounted for, framed in a bush of brown hair.

"So ye've brought him along wi' ye?" he said, staring straight at Nick. "Weel, I ax yer pardon, my lad, if I've offended ye. I haven't the pleasure o' yer acquaintance, ye ken, as folks say in genteel circles. Anyhow, nae harm's done, I'm thinkin', and ye're welcome to pot-luck. There's plenty for arl, I reckon. Eh, Libbie?"

The woman, who was stirring the pot, threw a short "Ay" over her shoulder. She seemed too much occupied with what she was doing to give any of her attention to other things.

Greyhound Geordie went up to the man he had called Matt, and dealt him what Nick took for a playful cuff, though the language he employed at the same time did not exactly match.

"Ye're a real haufthick, Matt," he said, in a voice which betrayed vexation. "Will ye niver larn to consider first and speak after? A *stranger*

laddie, like this yan, micht well think ye daft, if I wasn't here to assure him that appearances is not to be trusted. A man's not arlways what ye tak' him for, 't fust seet, ye ken. Eh, laddie?"

He turned to Nick as he spoke, who had been listening attentively, his face betraying that the double meaning of his companion's words was better understood than the speaker, probably, had expected.

"Weel, we maun just excuse him, pier feller!" said Geordie, with a short laugh, as his keen eyes took in the above fact. "But there, it'll mak' matters a bit clearer, mebbe, if I introduce you. This is Matt the Tinker, and the lady's Mistress Matt, his wife, and yon"—he pointed to a sturdy young man, a few years older than Nick, who was slouching near, with his hands in his pockets—"yon's the young hopeful, Pete Fitztinker, ha! ha! Gentlemen and leddy"—he waved his hands and made a mock bow—"alloo me to introduce into yer honourable society this distinguished traveller, Maister—— Hoots, lad!" he cried, turning suddenly to his *protégé*, "ye've niver telt me what they carl ye?"

"Nick," said the boy, shortly, for somehow, though he would have preferred not to give his name, no other would come to his tongue when he was so suddenly asked for it.

"A younger son o' the Auld Gentleman, eh?" suggested Pete, with a sneer.

But Greyhound Geordie quenched him with a frown.

"Nane o' yer sauce, ye varmint ye!" he said severely. "I'll let ye arl ken that this young chap is under my protection, as my guest for the neet, and ye maun treat him accordin', or——" He made a significant movement with his right hand, which seemed to be well understood, for even the insolent ragamuffin, who had been introduced as the son of the van, ventured on no further pleasantry just then.

"Yer meat's ready," said the woman who presided over the pot, turning a haggard, spiritless face towards the company. "Here, lend's a hand off wi' t' pot, Pete, and then reach to and help yoursel's."

Seeing that her son made no movement to obey, Nick started forward and gave a hand, and the woman and he between them lifted the cauldron, and placed it, as Mrs. Matt directed, between the van and the fire.

She thanked him with a look, then handed round spoons and tin basins, and, putting a huge iron ladle into the pot, motioned to the company to seat themselves on some logs under the lee of the van.

As seemed to be expected, each of the company in turn filled their basins for themselves with the savoury mixture—call it soup, or stew, as you like—which, so far as Nick could tell, when he had satisfied his hunger sufficiently to discriminate, was concocted of rabbits, onions, potatoes, and scraps of bread, well flavoured with pepper and salt.

The dogs were served with their masters; nay, so far as the Laird was concerned, before them, for Greyhound Geordie would not taste a morsel himself till the aristocratic gentleman whom he attended had been duly satisfied.

Nor did he allow Viper to be left out in the cold.

"That tyke o' yours hasn't t' vally o' mine," he said, as he placed a basin of stew before the greyhound, "but that's nae reason she should hunger. See she gets her fill, lad."

It was wonderful how quickly the contents of the cauldron disappeared. In a quarter of an hour it was utterly empty. Then Greyhound Geordie, who seemed to act as host and commander-in-chief to the whole party, called for spirits. A kettle, which had taken the place of the pot, was called into requisition, more sticks were heaped on to the fire, and the growing cold of the January night was defied by the quartette of men and lads, who sat on the logs with their backs to the van and their feet stretched out to the ruddy blaze. The woman alone took no part in the revel. As soon as the supper things were collected she carried them off to the inside of the van, and appeared no more. But the occasional cry of a child inside told Nick how she was most probably occupied.

Not that he troubled himself much with speculations concerning her, or, indeed, anything else. The sensation of rest and comfort, after the fatigue and privations of the last twenty-four hours, soothed

body and mind alike, dulling even the terrible memory, which, from time to time during the day, had risen before him, of that ghastly face on the moonlit moor. The fumes of the hot spirits were a powerful aid to this pleasant oblivion. The warmth of the fire and the lulling sound of the flames added their help. And, from watching the play of the red light on the road and the dark trees which shut it in, Nick's eyes, presently, ceased to watch at all. The consciousness of everything—past, present, and future—slipped from him. His head fell back, and he slept profoundly.

CHAPTER XVII.

MEDICAL ADVICE.

WHEN one awakes in the morning in a strange place, it often takes quite a long time to realize where one is and how one got there. This was Nick's experience, next morning. But it took a longer time for him even than for most people, for the hot spirits which he had swallowed the night before had gone to his unaccustomed brain, and his head was not yet by any means clear. He was lying upon a heap of sacks—he realized this first,—and over him was spread a woman's shawl in red and black check, with the edges a good deal tattered. Over his head were some arching boards. By the

light which came in from a little window not far from his head he could see that they were painted buff. The floor was strewn with what looked like makeshift bedding of various sorts, but there was no one else lying asleep there but one little pale-faced child.

He could see nothing of Viper, and, somehow, just then, he did not feel sufficient energy to seek for her.

It was a queer-looking little room, certainly, in which he found himself. But it was not only the look that was queer; for, presently, to Nick's great bewilderment and alarm, it began to move.

Two or three very big jolts made him feel as though he and the world were going to be upset in company. Then, before he knew what was really happening, a whip cracked, there was a creaking sound, and then a continuous swaying motion, which set sundry pots, pans, and kettles, which were suspended by crooks from the roof, in a rapid see-saw. Out of the little window Nick could now see a strip of blue sky, some black tree-tops, which seemed to be walking along it, and a pair of pointed white ears going up and down. And then at last he realized that his bedroom was on wheels, and that there was a horse harnessed to it which was pulling it along. That brought back memory, and so far as he *could* know, Nick knew all about it.

He sat up, rubbed his eyes, shook the shawl from off him, as he had shaken the hay the morning before, and, stepping over the child which still lay

sleeping beside him, he opened the door at the further end of the van and let himself drop to the ground.

He had no toilet to make, for he had gone to sleep in his clothes. But this did not discompose our friend, as it might have done had he been a respectable hero. For, indeed, sleeping fully dressed was no new experience to Nick. He had done so many a time before, in the days when he was tramping before he returned to Bellister.

It was a fine morning. The ground felt frozen under his feet, and there was rime upon the branches of the trees, upon the hanging fronds of the dead bracken, and, indeed, everywhere where snow was not.

But it was neither the fineness of the day nor the beauty of the frost-world which first attracted Nick's attention; it was the Laird o' Cockpen and little Viper, who were trotting along, side by side, at the tail of the van.

The greyhound took no notice of him, but the terrier's greeting was so demonstrative that it told all the rest of the company that the guest of the van was awake, and brought the Laird's master, who had been walking by Matt the Tinker at the horse's head, round to the back of the van.

"So ye've returned to a knowledge o' the cares o' this weary world, have ye, my lad?" he said, with a queer smile. "Whisky-land's a braw country, but a bit strange to you, eh? Hoo did ye like yer trip? Ye've been awa' a langish time."

Nick looked at the speaker, and grew red, partly with shame, partly with the tingling sense of ridicule which he could not wholly understand. The thought of Tramping Sal and the difficulties into which her fondness for spirits was always bringing her, came up before him, filling him with disgust and fear. Was it to be, as Mrs. Ridley was wont to say, "like mother, like bairn," after all?

"Ye diven't mean to say that I was——" he began; but Greyhound Geordie interrupted him.

"Nay, nay, my lad," he said, observing that Nick hesitated over the word; "not quite sae far as *that*. But there, niver heed! We're used to sick travellin', and think nowt on't. Ye'll tak' a bit o' breakfast?"

But Nick's healthy appetite of the day before had deserted him for the time, and he declined.

"Thank ye kindly, maister," he said. "Ye've done overmuch for me arlready, since I canna get out o' yer debt. Me and the dog'll be gannin'."

"Where? Nay, ye telt me nobbut yesterday ye didn't ken where ye wanted to be. We're movin' on, aren't we? Why not gan wi' us?" Then noticing that Nick hesitated, he went on: "Ye say ye're wantin' to be oot o' my debt? Well, if ye'll bide till to-morrow, onyhow, I've a bit business on hand ye might help me with. Pete's, whiles, onreliable. *Now* will ye bide?"

Only one answer seemed possible to this proposal, and, in no wise loth, Nick gave it. He spent the day travelling slowly along with his new

companions at the chosen pace of "Miller," the old white horse. They camped by the roadside at dinner-time, took a nap by turns inside the van in the afternoon, and, by sunset, found themselves well across the Border, and within sight of a large village—Langburn.

Mrs. Matt, who had been much occupied during the day with the pale-faced child, who had caught a chill and was heavy and feverish, came timidly up to Nick as the van was brought to a standstill within the shelter of an old quarry by the roadside.

"Lad," she said hurriedly, looking all the while not at Nick but towards her husband and son, who, under the directions of Greyhound Geordie, were unloosing the Miller and preparing the night's encampment, "ye've a natur'ly face, and ye did me a good turn last neet, sae I think I can ask ye. *Wad* ye slip through to yonder village and bring me a bottle o' doctor's stuff for the bairn? It's shiverin' and chookin' wi' t' cauld, and I canna leave 't, let alone the supper."

Nick undertook the errand at once, though he wondered a little why he, the stranger, should be employed instead of the father or brother of the sick child.

"Slip off roond here and cut across t' fields," the woman went on, as she handed him the money for the medicine. "Be as sharp as ye can; and, mebbe, ye winna be missed. If they ask for ye, I'll say ye're gatherin' sticks for t' fire. Be sure ye

get back before supper's ready, or there'll be the mischief to pay; and it'll be me that'll have to pay for it, I reckon," she added under her breath.

Nick turned away, wondering a good deal more respecting the need of so much caution and secresy; but, hardly had he turned the corner of the quarry, and was hidden from the van by a clump of tall Scotch firs, than he felt the hand of the tinker's wife upon his arm.

"Lad," she whispered, "ye needna be tellin' folks whae t' bottle's for. Just ask at t' shop for some stuff for a badly bairn, and bring it reet back here."

It was on the tip of the lad's tongue to ask "Why?" but before he could put the question Mrs. Matt had glided away as noiselessly as she had come.

"Mebbe it's nobbut that man o' hers she's flayed on," said the lad to himself, after a few minutes spent in wondering. "He has the look o' an ugly customer, and his son, and arl. If it wasn't for t' auld chap I wadn't bide; but he's kind baith to man and beast. I wish she had't sent me to the village, though. If she did but ken, *I*'se the yan whae has cause to lie close. But it's gettin' dark, and, mebbe, I'll not be notished. Viper, my lass, thoo maun bide here till I come back."

He made a sign to the terrier, who had followed him, to stay inside the gate leading from the fields which he had crossed into the high-road. The dog obeyed, but with reluctance. She sat down on the

frozen grass, shivering, as much with vexation as with cold, her brown eyes anxiously following her master, as he opened and shut the gate, and walked rapidly away towards the village.

Nick was not long in reaching this. It was a fair-sized place, and contained more than one shop where the miscellanies of daily life could be bought.

He stood for some time outside the one in whose window various bottles of coloured glass gave promise of medicines to be found within. Now that he was again in the haunts of men, the fear of what he had done and what it might bring on him, which he had managed to keep at bay, came strongly over him, and he felt afraid to show himself in the lighted shop. He looked over his shoulder, saw several loungers in front of the opposite public-house eying him curiously, and for a moment was strongly tempted to run. But, second thoughts showing him the folly of such a course, he entered the shop and asked for the medicine.

The old man who was serving was very deaf, and had many questions to put concerning the ailments of the child for whom he was to prescribe; and Nick, to his dismay, found himself obliged to shout his answers into the old man's ears so loudly that they reached perforce many other pairs for whom they were not intended.

Moreover, as it unluckily happened, the answers were of such a nature as to arouse both attention and amusement in the idle listeners both inside

and out. For Nick had neglected to inform himself particularly as to the child's symptoms, and the scanty information which its mother had given, had, as has often happened to boys before, gone in at one ear and out at another, leaving but a faint impression behind it.

"Hoo can I be expected to supply pheesic for a body when I dinna ken either their yage or their badness?" asked the old chemist testily, speaking with the Scottish accent, which, like the pattern of a Paisley shawl, is nowhere more strongly marked than on the Border. "It's an auld body, I think ye said?"

"Nay," answered Nick, in the equally broad accent of his own side, "it's a bairn."

"A bairn? What for couldna ye no say sae suner, laddie?" was the querulous remark. "And what yage micht the bairn be?"

"I canna say," answered Nick, feebly.

"*Hum!* And is it a laddie or a lassie?"

Nick shook his head still more feebly, for on this point he was in the darkest ignorance.

"Heard ye iver sich a thing!" muttered the old chemist, turning to the two or three customers who had been getting served at the opposite counter, which was devoted to journalism, stationery, and postage stamps, and who now stood listening to the altercation. "Here's a laddie wantin' pheesic for a bairn he kens naethin' aboot! I'd wager a baubie he disn't even ken what ails it! Eh, my lad?" he went on, turning again to his embarrassed

customer. "Can ye tell me, mebbe, what's the nature o' the seckness?"

"I think—I think," faltered Nick, "it's—well, I diven't just ken the reet name, but it's what bairns *maistly* hez. Ye ought to ken better nor me."

"Better? Hear till the laddie? Hae I seen the bairn in question, if I may speer o' ye? (Mebbe he'll no ken sae mickle as *that!*") This later was meant as an aside to the audience. But, unfortunately, actors as well as audience hear the asides.

Nick turned red; his temper was rising.

"I'm nowther a chemist nor a doctor. But if I *were*, I'd mak' it my business to ken what's best for bairns when they're bad, without seein' them," he answered loftily.

The other customers laughed.

"There's ane for ye, Maister Scott!" said one of them. "See here, laddie," he went on, addressing himself to Nick. "Has the bairn a reed rash?"

"I diven't think't," answered Nick, feeling as though his schooldays had returned, and he were again in the clutches of the inspector. "It's white-like, onyhoo."

"Then it's neither the measles nor the scarlet-fever," answered his new interrogator. "Dis it crow like a cock, or bray like a cuddy (donkey)?"

"Nay, nowther the t' yan or the t' ither."

"Then it isna the croop nor the king-cough. Has it ony host (cough) at a'? Dis it wheeze like a bit chicken wi' the roup?"

"Ay, I think *that's* it!" answered Nick, brightening up.

The catechist did not exactly say, "Go to the top of the class, my lad," but he did what came to the same thing. He slapped Nick on the back, and chuckled gleefully.

"Then the bairn's caulded, that's what it is. Trust a fayther o' aucht to ken. A bottle o' stuff for a bairn wi' a cauld, Maister Scott," he went on, bawling the last words into the old chemist's ear in such a voice that the information was heard right across the street, and a voice called out from the opposite public-house, "Whilk o' yer farmily is it this time, Wattie Wilson? They'll be the ruin o' ye, at this rate!"

"It's nane o' mine; they're a' brawly!" shouted the big-voiced man in return. "And as for ruin it isna always bairns that's wanted to bring *that*, Rob Richieson. The whusky's a deal mair expensive to keep, and sae I tell ye."

There was a loud laugh in return, and when it had subsided Nick spoke.

He had observed that the chemist was looking first at a bottle and then at him, and the observation made him uneasy.

"I'll thank ye to gie me t' bottle and let me gan," he said.

"What priced bottle did ye say?" asked the old man, putting his hand to his ear.

For answer Nick took out the sixpence which Mrs. Matt had given him, and laid it on the counter.

The chemist's blank face lighted up, his eyes twinkled. Tearing off a piece of newspaper he rapidly folded it round a bottle, and handed it across to his customer.

"Laddie," he said, in quite a different voice, "gin ye'd let me see that saxpence a wee bittie sooner, I'd hae kent what ye wanted at once, wi'out sae mickle explanation. Gin ye've been keepit waitin', the blame's no *mine*."

"'Deed, but we micht hae kent that if we'd thought on!" laughed the big-voiced family-man. "There's a deal o' information lies in a bit o' siller to a clever mon like ye, Maister Scott. Weel, guid e'en to ye, my callant, and guid betterment to the wee'n!"

The latter sentence was bawled out after Nick, who, utterly out of patience, and full of uneasiness at the observation which he had so unwillingly attracted, had snatched at his bottle and hurried out of the shop.

Many eyes were upon him as he passed the village public and went down the street. He felt them even in his back. It was most unfortunate to have become such a centre of observation, and Nick did anything but bless Mrs. Matt, her sick child, and the medicine-bottle for the unwelcome notoriety they had brought him.

Suppose the news of what he had done should have already reached this out-of-the-way village? If Teddy were dead it might easily have done so, for the news of man-slaying (Nick refused to give

it a worse name) quickly spreads, and the slayer is always "wanted." For all he knew, a full description of his person might be already in every paper. What if these village folk should recognize and follow him? The mere idea was enough to lend wings to Nick's feet, as he sped down the road towards the gate where he had left Viper; nor did the thought of the trouble into which he might get if he were missed at the van make the state of his mind the easier.

As he stopped to open the gate, which was a high one and spiked at the top, he heard Viper's welcoming note and the rapping of her tail against the ground on the other side. But these were not the only sounds which he heard. Distinctly upon his ears there came the *thid-thud* of feet coming rapidly down the frozen road.

Neither the height of the gate nor the spikes a-top were obstacles to Nick after that. Finding it did not open easily he ceased to try, and scrambling over he hardly knew how, found himself, a minute later, crouching, with Viper between his knees, under the hedge inside.

His heart beat so loudly that it seemed to him that its *pit-a-pat* must, surely, betray him, and he listened to the approaching steps in an agony of fear lest they should stop at the gate.

But no, a moment later they went by, and, in the clear frosty starlight, Nick could see, as he peered through a chink in the hedge, the village postman trudging along with the night-mail upon his back.

Truly, conscience makes cowards of us all!

Reassured and greatly relieved, Nick scrambled to his feet, and, followed by his faithful friend, made the best of his way back to the van.

When he got there Mrs. Matt was in the act of trying to lift the big black cauldron from off the fire. None of the men were offering to help her. Indeed, only her husband and Greyhound Geordie were there. The former was sitting on a stone by the fire, smoking. The latter was at the back of the van, rubbing down the Laird, who had, evidently, been out hunting, and was covered with snow. Pete was nowhere to be seen.

Nick went up at once to the fire, and gave his help with the heavy pot, as he had done the night before.

"Well, hast a getten 't?" asked the woman in a whisper, as together they set down the big cauldron at some distance from her husband.

"Ay," answered the lad, "I have 't in my pooch."

"Give it here," said the woman, quickly; and it was transferred from Nick's pocket to her own.

"Ye've been lang," she went on, still in the same cautious whisper, as he helped her to get out the basins and spoon from within the van. "I've had to mak' a fine stowry aboot ye to keep 'em quiet. Ye saw some fine big branches a bit further down t' road we cam' by, I telt them, and ye're gone back to fetch them. I've put ye some ahint that tree there. Ye'd better fetch them out."

"But, mistress, what for cannot I speak t' treuth?"

asked Nick. "Surely there's nae blame in fetching a bottle for the bairn? I've nae cracter to keep up, I ken that, but I've niver been used to leein'."

"Then ye'll hev to get used, if ye bide wi' us," answered the woman, shortly, but as she said it she sighed. "If ye tak' my advice, lad, ye'll not bide over lang."

Nick would have liked to ask her what she meant; but, at this moment, Greyhound Geordie's voice was heard calling for his supper, and, leaving Nick to fetch his branches, Mrs. Matt hurried to the fire with the spoons and basins.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LAIRD O' COCKPEN.

"LAD," said Mrs. Matt to Nick, who, having refused a share of the spirits the night before, was early astir, and was helping his hostess to light the fire and prepare breakfast—"Lad, have ye hed ony schoolin'?"

"Ay," he answered, feeling surprised, as he usually did, when Mrs. Matt said anything to him. "Why?"

She drew a piece of crumpled paper from her pocket, smoothed out the creases upon her knee, and, after a careful glance at the van, handed it to Nick.

The pair were alone, for the other three men

were all inside, and fast asleep. Pete, who had not returned till late, the evening before, was snoring loudly.

Nick looked at the paper. It had, evidently, been torn from some weekly journal; he could see as much as that from the printing in large letters at the top of the page.

"Well?" he asked, and looked at Mrs. Matt.

Her face showed nervousness, but her voice was pretty well under control as she said—

"I heven't seen a paper this lang while, and I'm wishin' to hear if there's ony news. This was wrapped round the bottle ye brought last neet. I canna mak' oot mair nor a word or twae, for I've hed little larnin'. Will ye read it to me? This is the bit I've been tryin' to spell oot, but I can mak' but little on't. Ye might begin here."

She laid her finger upon an advertisement, and Nick observed that it shook.

"Ye're cauld, missus," he said; "let's set a light to t' fire, and then——"

"Nay," she said imperiously; "read first."

And Nick obeyed.

The side of the paper which was turned upwards was covered with advertisements. The one indicated ran as follows:—

"Wanted a traveller for the Cart, Carriage, and Van trade. Must not be more than fifty years of age. Character and experience required. Apply to Elliott, Grant, & Co., Cart and Carriage-Builders, Hexham."

Having read this out in slow, laboured fashion, for Nick had forgotten a good deal of the schooling he had got with Teddy and Meg, he looked up at Mrs. Matt and asked with a smile—

"Did ye think that wad suit *ye*, mistress?" He kept his eyes on her face after he had spoken, for something in her expression struck him. Some load seemed removed from her mind.

"Nay," she answered, with the first smile he had seen on her face. "But, mebbe, it might do for Matt. Are ye sure that's arl it says, lad?" The anxiety was back in her eyes for a moment.

"Ay," answered Nick; "that's arl."

"It was the *van* caught my eye," explained Mrs. Matt—"that and the names. Elliott and Grant will be the men who make the vans and things, likely?"

"Ay," answered Nick again, wondering why she should care to know.

"And there's nothin' else aboot them, is there?" asked the woman again, "nor nothin' mair about—about vans? Both Matt and Pete has experience in *drivin'* them, onyhow," she added, with a queer little attempt at a laugh.

Nick looked down the page.

"Nay, missus," he said promptly, "there's nowt forbye that. Here's somebody wantin' a smith and another a ploughman; and ever sae mony want servant-lasses. But that's the only advertisement aboot vans."

"Look if there's ony mair, t' other side," said

Mrs. Matt again. "I diven't think't. But I'm nae scholar, as I tell ye, and I'd like to feel sure."

"There's news, this side," answered Nick, turning the paper, "and ye said at first it was news ye wanted. Shall I read it tiv ye, mistress? I'm sorry I canna gan quicker."

"Nay," she said hastily; "I've nae time for the news at present. It can keep. There's t' breakfast to see to now. Put t' paper in yer pocket, and we'll look at it later. There's enough for t' fire here."

She began to stuff some whitey-brown paper under the sticks which she had built up where the fire had been the night before, and, kneeling down before the pile, set a light to it, and cautiously blew the mounting flame.

"Ye might seek a few more sticks, laddie," she said, without lifting her head between the puffs.

But Nick did not stir. Glancing over the paper he held, he had come upon a paragraph which riveted his attention, so that he did not so much as hear what Mrs. Matt said.

BRUTAL ASSAULT NEAR THE ROMAN WALL (this is what he was reading, the blood throbbing so heavily in his heart and brain as to set the letters dancing before him).—"On the morning of the 20th inst., as James Graham, shepherd, was out on the moors to the north of Haltwhistle, his attention was attracted to a shielding near the Wall by the strange behaviour of his dog. Thinking some sheep might have

strayed in and be in need of assistance, Mr. Graham made his way into the enclosure, and was shocked to find a youth lying there, bleeding profusely, and quite insensible. There were marks of a struggle on the ground in the neighbourhood, and the unfortunate youth had, evidently, received a blow on the head from some heavy weapon. Help was procured, and the young man, who it transpires is a son of Mr. John Ridley of Bellister, was conveyed to his home. Drs. Shield and Billow are in attendance, but it is greatly feared that the poor young fellow will succumb to his injuries, which are of the gravest character. He has not yet recovered consciousness, and, consequently, has not been in a condition to give any information as to the assault. But there is reason to believe that the abandoned author of this most dastardly outrage is none other than a farm-servant, lately in Mr. Ridley's employ, whom he was obliged to dismiss summarily for stealing. Should this prove to be the case, the fact that this abandoned young criminal was taken by Mr. Ridley into his family at a very early age, and treated as one of his own children, adds the ingredient of the most heartless ingratitude to a crime already sufficiently atrocious, and which, if traced home to this youth, will undoubtedly bring upon him the utmost rigour of the law. The lad in question has not been seen since his dismissal, which occurred on the day previous to the finding of his young master in the condition previously stated ; but the police are making inquiries which, it is hoped, will speedily lead to——"

Here the paper was torn off, and Nick could read no further.

Even had there been more, however, it is doubtful whether he would have been able to read it, just then. To get even as far as this had been a matter of difficulty, not only on account of the long newspaper words, many of which he had had to "skip and go on," according to the well-worn

recipe, but from a hindrance which could not be so easily got over.

This was the state of overmastering fear into which the account had thrown him. His whole being was in a ferment; and, as he sat there, staring at the paper which he had ceased to read, he was utterly unconscious of his surroundings. The quarry, the van, "the Miller," nay, even the crackling fire, which, under Mrs. Matt's improvised bellows, was blazing up right in front of him, had vanished away. In their place he saw only a stretch of rolling moorland, a broken wall, and a face white in the moonlight.

"Come, lad, hast gone to sleep again? Where are them sticks?" said Mrs. Matt's voice, and she laid a grimy hand upon his shoulder and shook him gently.

Nick started, and stared at her.

"Ay, the sticks—the *sticks* I say, lad! Diven't ye hear me? I thought ye'd gone lang since. T' fire 'll be doon again directly if ye dinna look sharp, and I hear oor folks stirrin' arlready. They diven't like to be keept waitin' on their breakfas'."

Mrs. Matt spoke in an unusually sharp tone, and this brought Nick to his senses, as gentler treatment might have failed to do. Thrusting the paper into his pocket, he went off in the direction pointed out by the tinker's wife, in search of the fuel required. The active employment and the quiet around him served to steady his nerves and bring him into a condition of mind and body less likely

to betray his fears to those in whose company he was travelling.

He reflected that he was more likely to escape the notice of the police with his present companions than if he were travelling alone; and the cautious manner in which the party avoided large towns and encamped in lonely places could not have suited him better.

If only he could get the opportunity of changing his clothes for another suit, he thought he might remain undiscovered.

One fact he had learned which gave him the greatest relief. Teddy had not been killed outright. Youth is proverbially hopeful, and as, according to the paper, the boy was still alive, Nick made sure that he would live, and his sense of guilt was proportionately lessened.

His first care at present was to control himself sufficiently to avoid self-betrayal; and this, notwithstanding a white face and a shaking hand, he contrived to do when he returned to the encampment with his sticks.

The men of the party had, by this time, made their appearance, and were performing such toilet as each felt to be necessary, in front of the fire.

Greyhound Geordie, indeed, had smartened himself up considerably. Instead of the shabby suit in which Nick had first seen him, he had donned some spick-and-span clothes of checked tweed, and a Tam-o'-Shanter with a red tassel and a tartan band. He looked more "sporting" than ever, as he stood

there, combing out his whiskers with a pocket-comb, while "the Laird," also clad in a new jacket, and brushed till his glossy black coat shone like new satin, sat at his feet, blinking at the fire.

"Nick, my lad," said the greyhound's master, addressing the boy as he came up with his arms full of fuel, "get yer porridge, and then fettle yersel' up a bit. You and I are goin' off for the day."

Nick felt considerably dismayed by this announcement, and would much have liked to ask "where?" before giving his consent. But this seemed taken for granted, and, remembering that he had rashly promised his help to Geordie the day before, he thought it safest to make no objection.

Accordingly, when the porridge and milk had been swallowed, Nick went to the neighbouring stream to wash his hands and face, and then made use of the "reddin'-keam," which, as in Bellister back kitchen, hung behind the door of the van.

The white-faced child was lying on its shake-down on the floor, staring up at the roof with watery blue eyes, and, as Nick's friend of the evening before had described it, "wheezing like a chicken wi' the roup."

"But she's a deal better, is the bairn, thanks to ye," whispered Mrs. Matt, who was preparing to administer a spoonful of "the bottle," and the poor woman's grateful look went to Nick's heart, full though it was of his own troubles.

"Ye might as weel leave yon tyke o' yours

wi' me while ye're awa'," said Pete, as our friend came out of the van. "Moother wants a few rabbits for the pot, and she'll, mebbe, help me to get them."

Nick was about to object, but Greyhound Geordie cut him short.

"Ay, she'd best be left," he said; "she'd nobbut be in t' way. I want ye to help me with the Laird. Come, it's time we were off. Ye ken the spot we're to meet at, Matt, eh?"

The brown-bearded man nodded, and Geordie and his companion moved off, with the Laird stalking behind them.

Little Viper looked appealingly at her master, who had made her a sign to remain. She quivered all over with eagerness to follow, and her brown eyes grew sad and wistful as she watched him disappear. But her obedience was stronger than her desires; and, though her tail dropped lower and lower, she remained heroically at her post.

Greyhound Geordie seemed in a good humour. He whistled a few bars of an air he was specially fond of, and in honour of which the Laird o' Cockpen had received his name. He was still whistling the same bars over and over again, for somehow he never seemed able to compass the whole, when he and his companion left the lane along which they had been walking and entered the high-road.

Nick had a moment's anxiety lest their destination should be the village where he had been on

the evening before. But Geordie soon set this at rest by turning in the opposite direction.

Tiring at length of "The Laird o' Cockpen" —not the dog, of course, but the song so called —the greyhound's master seemed to recollect that he had a human companion, and began to speak.

"Now then, laddie," he said, just as though he had been speaking all the time, "ye'll mind what I say, and be *vara* exact? The Laird's over-precious to be trifled with, and he's vara sensitive to the cauld. Ye understand?"

Nick certainly did not; his face said as much. But whether it was really his companion's fault, or that of his own preoccupied mind, he could not tell.

"There ye gan!" exclaimed the man, half testily, half whimsically. "Ye're arl alike, ye lads—niver can listen to what a body says! I micht nearlings as weel ha' ta'en Pete. What is't yer sayin'? Never telt ye? Come now, ye winnot catch Greyhound Geordie nappin'. He's arlways wide awake—*over*-wide for *some* folks, mebbe. Eh?"

He chuckled, and the thought he was chuckling over seemed to sweep away the little mist of ill-humour.

"Well, niver mind, my lad, just attend now, and it'll be arl reet. This is oor programme. Aboot a mile from here we'll come to a pit-village, where the Laird and me hez a few calls to pay. You'll

wait outside, in a cattle-shed I'll show you, till we come back. When we do, I'll be bringin' a young dog along wi' me. He's a son o' the Laird's, and a promising chip o' t' auld block, too. Me and his faither hez a lesson to gie him—i' t' coursin' line, ye ken—for his owner wants him entered for the spring meetin's. Weel, we'll gie him a bit run, and then his maister'll tak' him heame. After that I've an errand to do in a toon over there"—he pointed to where, over a line of hills, a little mist of smoke rose into the frosty air. "I'll gan mesel', and ye can follow wi' t' Laird, keepin' movin' sae as not to let him ketch a chill. Ye'll come as far as the toll-gate, and then, if ye see nowt on me there, skirt the toon to the gate, t' other side, and ask the mistress whae keeps it to let ye and t' Laird sit by her fire till I come. Ye understand? Mind I canna hae mistakes; sae if ye're not clear, I'll say it ower again."

But Nick had no need of that, and the first part of the programme was carried out without a hitch.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ANGEL AND A STAR.

It was about five o'clock, so far as Nick could judge; at any rate the sun had set, and twilight was beginning to fall when he and his charge reached the first gate-house of the town to which Greyhound Geordie had directed him.

What the town was called he did not know, for his employer had omitted to add this little item of information, and Nick had been too indifferent to ask him. His mind was still busy with his own concerns, and it required an effort to give his attention to anything else.

There were some posters on the walls near the toll-gate, and he felt his heart beating again with unaccustomed rapidity as he scanned them closely in the gathering twilight. But there was nothing to alarm him in their blue-and-white and black-and-yellow announcements, and he soon ceased to trouble about them.

It grew darker, and as nothing could be seen of Geordie, and the greyhound was beginning to shiver through all his delicate limbs, Nick set about carrying out the remainder of the directions which he had received.

In the dark, however, he took a wrong turning,

which, instead of leading him round the town, took him into one of the inferior streets of the outskirts.

Here a second-hand clothes-shop, with rows of half-worn garments of all sorts hanging outside the lighted window, attracted his attention.

So far as he could see, many of them seemed no better than his own. Suppose he were to go in and try to effect an exchange?

The opportunity seemed too good to be lost. Summoning up his courage Nick went in, taking the Laird with him.

The shopkeeper was an elderly Jew, as old clothesmen usually are, and he eyed the lad sharply as he entered.

"Well, young gent," he said sarcastically, "how can I serve you?"

Nick asked to look at some second-hand suits from among those he had noticed as likely to serve his purpose, and selected a set of velveteens, which had apparently belonged to some gamekeeper in happier days and had seen hard service.

"Will ye give me these in exchange for my own?" he asked. "They're not that bad, but they're a bit tight for me."

The lad reddened as he gave the reason, feeling that though true in one sense it was not so in another.

The Jew's disagreeable mouth screwed itself up in a smile still more disagreeable than its usual expression.

"Tight for ye?" he said. "Ye're in a tight place, ye mean. Eh?"

Nick felt himself wishing that he had stayed outside *this* place, at any rate. But, meantime, the Jew's eyes, sharp at a bargain, were noting the merits of Teddy's old suit.

"How much is there of it?" he asked in a more business-like tone.

"How much?" repeated Nick, failing to understand.

"Ay. How many pieces? Jacket and trousers only, or waistcoat as well?"

"Ay, there's a waistcut."

Nick took off the jacket that the tradesman might see.

The Jew examined it closely, then he made the boy turn round that he might inspect the other articles also.

"Throw half a crown in, and it's a bargain," he said presently.

"But I have nae money. Besides, that suit of yours wants the waistcoat, and I'm ready to throw mine in."

"Can't be done."

Nick's heart sank; but, as there seemed no help for it, he was putting on his jacket again, when the old clothesman said, looking at the Laird—

"That's a fine dog. Yours?"

"No."

"If it *had* been, your pockets would have been better lined, eh? Well, I don't want to be hard

on ye, my lad. If my suit 'ill fit ye better, ye can leave yours. I shall lose by the exhange, I doubt; but there's a blessing on him that considereth the poor and needy. Now then!"

He helped Nick to doff his tweeds and don his velveteens, and, when the exchange was effected, though the fit was better, it was easy to see who was the gainer by the transaction, so far as appearances went.

The gamekeeper, it seemed, had had a thrifty wife, for the patches were many and the good portions of the garments but few. However, Nick felt his heart easier, as he left the shop and Teddy's cast-offs behind him, and walked down the street with a view to striking the road which skirted the town.

He was passing what looked like a money-changer's and pawnbroker's, when the Laird suddenly put his elegant nose in the air, sniffed, and tugged at his leash to go towards the door.

Nick pulled him back, but the dog's movements had brought him close to the window of the shop, and, being anxious to know what the Laird's attraction could be, he looked in.

What he saw, while explaining the greyhound's conduct, awakened the curiosity of the boy still further.

A man was standing at the counter with a wash-leather bag in his hand, of the sort used to contain money. The string which bound the neck was undone, and the man was in the act of taking out

a broad piece of gold and handing it across the counter to the money-changer.

Though the man's back was towards the window, Nick could not for a moment mistake him. It was Greyhound Geordie himself. But it was the piece of gold now in the money-changer's hand which riveted Nick's attention most of all.

The man who held it was examining it closely, turning it first to one side, then to the other, rubbing it, trying the edge. A jet of gas burnt over his head, and close to this he was holding the coin, to get all the light on the subject he could.

The examination was long, and the watcher outside the window was able to study the coin as well, if less closely at least as attentively, as the money-changer.

It was a handsome piece of gold, bearing on one side the figure of an angel treading on a dragon, and Nick saw with amazement that it was, if not one of the same, at any rate exactly similar to the coins he and Meggie had found in Bellister Castle.

The blood tingled in his veins and throbbed in his brain as he looked, and the question rose in his mind: How did it come into Greyhound Geordie's possession?

But he had no time even to think of the answer, for, at that moment, the master of the Laird o' Cockpen turned suddenly round, and fearing to be caught spying, Nick dragged the dog away, and plunged down a narrow alley, which, as he judged, would lead him out of the town.

The Laird was very unwilling to leave the place where he had seen his master, and Nick's progress was, consequently, slow. But, by dint of coaxing and dragging, he managed to get the beast along, and he was just leaving the alley for the road which skirted the town when Greyhound Geordie overtook him.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, recognizing Nick immediately by the dog, in spite of his change of clothes, which, probably, he did not observe in the dim light. "How come ye here, ye young vagabond? Didn't I tell ye to keep outside the toon?"

"Ay, but I missed my road," answered Nick, somewhat sulkily; for, though he had been called a vagabond many a time before, he resented the term at the mouth of Greyhound Geordie, who, as it seemed to him, was here in the same boat as himself.

"Then yer a fool for yer pains—if ye didn't miss it a' purpose, that is," the man went on roughly, for he was evidently put out of his usual easy good-humour. "Hey, what's this?" he continued, taking Nick by his shoulder as they passed a gas-lamp. "Another rig out, eh? Then ye *did* miss it a' purpose. Ye'd better ha' said sae at yance. Lees is nae good when they're sure to be found out, and sae I tell ye, young feller!"

"Ye may say what ye like, and carl me what ye please; I'm used to 't," answered the lad, his passionate temper rising. "But leein's not *my* way, onyhow. I *did* miss t' road; and if my clothes

were not suitable and I saw a chance to change them in comin' along, there's nae harm done, sae far as I can see, and ye've nae cause to find fault."

"Eh? Hear till t' young cock! He craws loud for yan o' his feather. Eh, Laird?" was the sarcastic retort; and then the old man went into one of his chuckles.

"Weel, weel, lad," he presently resumed, in a more kindly tone, "ye, mebbe, had yer reasons, and we'll say nae mair. Put yer best foot foremost; for if *ye* aren't wantin' yer supper, *I* am, and sae's the Laird, I fancy. Eh, Cockpen?"

He patted the dog's head, which the creature was rubbing against his knee as a silent reminder of its presence, and then the three moved on together at a swinging pace.

The stars had come out and were shining brightly overhead in a frosty sky. The trees showed a network of black branches against a glimmering background of greenish amber, which was fast paling to grey. A great silence was upon the land, and, once they were out of the town, no sound was heard but the beat of their own footsteps upon the frozen road.

For some time both Greyhound Geordie and Nick walked on in silence. Each was speculating about the other with an uncomfortable feeling of suspicion.

How came the old man by that coin? wondered the boy; and were there others like it in that leather bag he had seen in his possession? Could

it be that this man, by whose side he was walking and whose meat he had eaten, was, after all, the thief? If so, how great was the wrong which had been done to Teddy!

This last thought came before Nick had argued out the questions which preceded it, and with it a sudden rush of anger against his present companion. As is often the case with a person whose conscience smites him for a mistake or a sin, he was ready to visit his discomfort on another rather than bear all the weight of it himself.

After a while, however, with cooler and calmer consideration, he began to see how unlikely was the conclusion he had so hastily jumped to. How could Greyhound Geordie, an utter stranger, have discovered the treasure? And, even supposing he had done so, how did this account for the iron box which had contained it being found in Teddy Ridley's possession?

The whole business was, indeed, a puzzle beyond his power to disentangle; and at last he wearied of trying.

Greyhound Geordie, on his side, was wondering what secret Nick possessed that he was so carefully hiding from him. That there *was* a secret he felt sure. He was too acute and experienced an old stager not to have guessed this at once. That the exchange of clothes had to do with it he knew as well as if Nick had told him, and the heat with which the lad had repelled his imputations only confirmed him in his opinion. In one thing he

wronged the lad, as we know; for, in spite of Nick's denial, he clung to the belief that he had disobeyed his injunctions on purpose by entering the town.

What he most wanted to know at that moment, however, was whether Nick had tracked him to the money-changer's and had spied upon the private transaction which had taken place there. For reasons of his own he wished that transaction to remain unknown to the rest of his party; and to think that his plan of escaping the curiosity of Matt and his son by taking a stranger with him, that day, instead of either of them, had, after all, been defeated, would have vexed him more than a little.

It was with a view to obtaining intelligence on this point that crafty old Geordie began the following conversation.

"Hoo did the Laird treat ye when ye were alane wi'm?" he asked, after covertly observing his companion for some time.

Nick started. He had been too much absorbed in his own speculations to be aware of the scrutiny he had been undergoing.

"Oh, weel enough!" he answered carelessly, when the question had been repeated.

"Niver saw onybody he kent, eh?"

"We met naebody but strangers," answered Nick, only saving himself from the trap his companion had laid for him through unconsciousness of the drift of this question.

"He's nowther to bind nor to hold when he

scents *me*," remarked Geordie, and watched his companion narrowly the while.

But Nick was again absorbed in his own speculations, and said nothing.

"D'ye see yon star?" asked the greyhound's master, presently, after a disappointed shake of the head, pointing to a bright star in one of the constellations, glittering overhead.

Again the lad looked up.

"Ay," he said half-absently.

"D'ye ken what it's called, young chap?"

"Nay," was the uninterested answer.

"Then ye *ought* to ken, my lad," said the man, in a decided voice. "Now listen to me and I'll tell ye. Ye're not listening, now!" he went on sharply.

Nick tried to attend.

"Weel," he asked, "what is't?"

"It's the Dog-star, that's what it's called," answered Geordie. "An auld chap that kent aboot them things, or *thought* he did, telt me yance, that, if a body was born when that star was shinin', he'd have the life of a dog and the death of yan too. I dinna ken if it's true; but if my moother thought on reetly, and that auld chap telt me correct, *I* was born under yon star. I've hed a queer sort o' life, and I've always been more partial to dogs than to human bein's," he added meditatively, "sae, mebbe, he's reet."

He looked attentively at his companion, and then spoke again:

"*Ye're* partial to dogs and arl, as I observe, young chap. Mebbe, ye were born under yon star as weel's me?"

Nick reddened. The speaker had touched upon a sensitive point.

"I dinna ken when or where I was born," he answered with bitterness. "But there! What dis it matter? Naebody wants to keep the birthday o' such as I!"

The old man observed him with fresh interest.

"It matters naething when ye look at it *yan* way, but a deal if ye tak' 't from *anither* point o' view," he went on sagely. "There's some folk born under a lucky star unbeknown to theirsel's. These mak' their way in the warld wi'out needin' to fash their heeds aboot their beginnin's. The warld marks the birthdays o' these and writes them wi' reed letters, even if it hez to invent the dates. For sich as these it disn't matter. But ther're ithers, sich as you and me, lad, mebbe, born to an evil inheritance from the cradle upward. Naebody credits us wi' ought that's guid unless we can *force* them to recognize us as sons o' worthy folk. If ye canna mak' a name for yersel, it's as well to ken yer faither's, and to gar (make) folk remember it. 'Give a dog a bad name and hang it,' ye ken, as the auld saw says. A guid name's a useful badge, whiles. But there! that's philosophy, young feller, and a bit above yer head, mebbe. I was only thinkin' if ye could trust me wi' yer story we might mak' some useful discoveries. There's a deal in

the stars that folks who hasn't studied them canna read. Now, *I* can read them a bit. I've observed them shinin' mony a neet, and that auld chap I telt ye of put me up to mony a secret. Come, lad, we're all to oursel's, for the Laird disn't count, being no revealer o' secrets. Ye're sore burdened wi' a secret, I can see. Out wi't!"

But the crafty old heathen's starry bait was not swallowed as he had expected.

Neither astrology nor its revelation could "draw" our hero. It was not that he disbelieved in the stars, having learnt no better lore, but he distrusted their expounder. That glimpse through the window of the money-changer's shop had grievously shaken his faith in the integrity of Greyhound Geordie.

CHAPTER XX.

TWO STRINGS TO THEIR BOW.

IF it had not been for the consciousness of having made for himself an evil reputation, and his fear of the punishment which discovery would bring down upon him, it is probable that Nick would now have been ready to take the advice of Mrs. Matt, and to part with his present company.

But, as things were, he did not know how to better his position; and when, on the principle, perhaps, that those who know too much are better

not lost sight of, Greyhound Geordie offered him his keep in return for such services as he might be able to render, Nick decided to accept.

What these services were to be the lad did not quite understand.

"Ye can help Matt wi' the tinkering when there's nowt better to dae," Geordie had said, when he had made the offer; but, so far as had yet appeared, the old pots and kettles suspended both inside and outside the van, and the soldering-iron and ladle, thrown into a corner, were the only signs of the business professed by the travellers which Nick could discover.

Had it not been for the rabbit-snaring and hare-hunting which went on whenever it could be done without risk of discovery, it was hard to see how the party earned their living. The pot had to thank the Laird o' Cockpen for more than one savoury hare; and Pete's snares and Viper's more open exertions provided a good store of daily rabbits.

But the latter would hunt for no one but herself and her master. Nick had found the terrier in dire disgrace with Pete, on the evening of his excursion with Greyhound Geordie. For Viper had absolutely refused to leave the van while her master was away, and no amount of coaxing or beating would induce her to follow the tinker's son.

Pete, accordingly, had taken a violent dislike to her and she to him. He never missed the opportunity of abusing her, and she retorted with snarls

and such displays of her sharp white teeth as Nick had never before seen. Viper, indeed, had won for herself a bad name, that day, by her persistent ill-humour, and was looked on henceforth by Pete and his father as an ill-conditioned brute whose presence was only suffered because Greyhound Geordie desired it.

But kidnapped hares and rabbits which cannot be sold with safety do not account for an unlimited supply of bread, oatmeal, tea, coffee, and cheese, to say nothing of tobacco and whisky, and where the money came from to buy these articles was a puzzle which Nick was long in solving. That the money was there was a fact beyond all doubt. He had himself seen gold in Greyhound Geordie's possession, and more than once he had been sent into the villages after dark with silver in his hand to buy provisions.

But no one can live an idle life, with plenty to eat and drink, without an income of some kind, and a regular income is not usually possessed by travelling tinkers, whose trade is a matter of no importance, as appeared to be the case with Nick's new friends.

The only other source of profit of which Nick could think was the Laird o' Cockpen. He knew that dogs like this often bring a fair amount of grist to the mill, and that various of the Bellister pitmen had won more by their dogs' prowess at a coursing-match than by months of their own labour below ground.

This might account for a good deal, but it did not satisfy him altogether. Nevertheless, in spite of his doubts, the lad felt that he was not in a position to quarrel with his bread and butter, or even to inquire too closely where it came from. And, moreover, the daily "nightcap" of hot whisky and water which Geordie forced on his *protégé*, "to keep out the cold and drown dull care," as he said, was having its effects. Under its insidious influence the lad ceased to feel ashamed, even when, as often happens with one young and unaccustomed, he forgot what happened for many hours after the glass was emptied. Since this potent spirit could lay the vision of that white face among the heather, which still often haunted his sober hours; since it served to banish the remembrance of the past and give him courage, even if this were only of the sort called "Dutch," to face the future, what cared he that this spirit was a fiend which, under the guise of friendship, was luring him to ruin?

Ruin! Was he not ruined already; branded as an outcast, and looked on with scorn by those who called themselves "respectable"?

Never since he could remember had he been credited with anything that was good. What mattered it then what he did?

Poor Nick! he had been pushed over the slope of the hill by those who should have known better. Can we blame him altogether if he were fast becoming reckless as to where he rolled? But, unkind as the world is to such unfortunate beings as

poor Nick, there is One above the world who never allows one of His creatures "to go to the dogs," as the saying is, without giving him a chance to turn round. And this chance was now to be offered to our ragamuffin hero.

The van usually travelled for a short distance every day when the roads allowed of progress; but there came a day, when Nick had been with the party for about a week, when a longer halt was made than usual.

The place chosen was a piece of waste ground covered with whin-bushes, and well riddled with rabbit-holes. A small wood of red-boled Scotch firs sheltered this on two sides. On the third rose a steep hill, and a country road, bordered by high banks topped by thorns and holly-bushes, skirted it on the remaining side.

A gate from this road led into the little enclosure, and, when the van was driven through this, and drawn up under the shelter of the wood, it could not be seen by any one passing by. In this cosy nook it remained for two nights without moving, nor did Nick see any signs of a change of position when the third evening came.

It was now February. Milder weather had set in, but there was no rain to make the roads heavy, nor any apparent reason against travelling. The Miller seemed very well satisfied with the arrangement. He spent the interval in cropping such blades of fresh grass as had managed to spring up under the snow and were now uncovered by the

thaw, and in resting his old bones by standing at ease with legs all anyhow and head bent.

His masters were but little at the encampment during the day.

Greyhound Geordie and his charge were off on some expedition, as were also Matt and Pete. So far as Nick could make out, it was not in the same direction; but no official information had been vouchsafed to him as to the movements of his companions.

"We've arl a bit business to attend to, my lad," the old man said, as he finished his greyhound's toilet, a matter he attended to, as a rule, much more scrupulously than his own. "We diven't need your help to-day; that'll come later, mebbe; sae ye and yer tyke can get a few rabbits for the pot."

Nick had quickly perceived that questions were received with scant favour by his hosts and bore fruit too scanty by way of answers to make them worth putting. So he refrained from inquiries and did as he was bid.

Of Mrs. Matt he saw but little, that first day. Her sickly child, though it had to some extent recovered from the first attack, was ailing again, and she spent most of her time with it inside the van.

The second day of the halt passed much as the first had done. Nick was away rabbiting with Viper most of the time, and in this solitary spot there seemed no one to interfere with their sport, neither keeper nor watcher coming near them. When he came back to the van he thought Mrs.

Matt looked even more haggard and anxious than usual. He fancied once that she was about to say something to him; but, just at that moment, her husband and son returned, and nothing came of it.

Nick was very tired that night, and went to bed sooner than usual. Whether the whisky was less strong than usual, or whether he were growing more used to it, the lad did not know; but certain it is that he went to bed more sober than had lately been his wont.

He lay awake for some time after entering the van, listening drowsily to the talk going on amongst those he had left round the fire, which was chiefly about the exploits of the Laird o' Cockpen. The dog's master was fond of flavouring his whisky with this favourite topic, and the other men rarely interrupted him. Presently, however, when Mrs. Matt had retired to her part of the van, which was curtained off at night for herself and her child, the conversation became more general. Matt, and even Pete, contributed to it; but it was sustained in such low voices that but very little reached the interior of the van.

After a while, however, this cautious tone was less carefully kept up. For, just as Nick was dropping off to sleep, he was roused by hearing Pete say, in a raised voice—

"Ye'd better leave him out on't, I tell ye."

"Who asked *your* opinion, young spark?" struck in Greyhound Geordie's voice, in very decided tones. "I tell ye his innicent face will be sure to

take them in. We'll send him round to t' back o' the house to ask for kettles and pans to mend, and a story aboot the sick bairn, while we——"

"Whisht!" exclaimed Matt, hurriedly. "What's that?"

"What's *what*, my wiseacre?" asked Geordie, sarcastically. "Ye diven't mean to say ye canna recognize the snore o' yer ain missus? It's a trumpet-note indeed, but it needna gie us the alarm."

"Just squint inside and see if she and the lad are sound, Pete," said Matt, without noticing the thrust. His mental skin, indeed, was sufficiently thick to cause many of his leader's shafts to glance harmlessly off.

Pete yawned and stretched himself.

"Nay, faither," he said, "there's nae occasion to fash. That lump o' a lad is niver good for aught after the whisky; and as for moother, as the maister man says, she speaks for hersel'."

Greyhound Geordie laughed.

"I didna ken I said joost *that*," he returned; "but ye're aboot reet, my young spark. Folks disn't trumpet like that when they're on the alert. Well then, as I was sayin', we'll mak' arl ready for an early start, yance this job's over. There ought to be money in it worth the risk. It's a good while since we had such a chance."

"Ay, and sma' risk," put in Matt. "Nobbut yan auld lady and a servant-lass—and a man outside, d'ye say? Well, that's a pity! but never mind

sae lang as there's nae alarm, he'll bide in his cottage, and if he *dis* hear—well, we're plenty to tackle him."

"And ye think ye'll get the lad in there to do the job, maister?" asked Pete's voice.

"Ay. Why not? He'll suspect nothin'?"

"Nivertheless, if ye'll tak' *my* advice, ye'll leave him oot, as I said before," remarked Pete, stolidly.

"And do away wi' a well-laid plan, eh, lad?" asked Geordie, scornfully. "But there, ye've nae head for a stratagem! Ye diven't see where the wisdom o' my plan lies. Ye're a bit sharper than yer daddy, mebbe, but *that's* not sayin' a vast! Well, if ye canna see what I'm drivin' at, at least haud yer tongue and leave arrangements to wiser heeds. Now then, it's time to turn in."

They tumbled into the van, and Nick, who was now wide awake, had to feign the sleep which generally came so naturally.

Here was a new puzzle, and it occupied him for hours, as he lay listening to the snoring of his companions, who had soon added their trumpet-notes to those of Mrs. Matt.

What a noise they made! Nick, who was seldom awake to hear this nightly concert, wished all the performers far enough, quite forgetting that, in all probability, his own instrument usually played in the same band. But the audience is allowed to be critical, whatever its own powers may be. And what about the puzzle which had chased away his own sleep, and was making him so impatient over that

of others? Ay, there lay the secret of his unrest. What was the meaning of the conversation, a fragment of which he had overheard?

That some deed of darkness was being planned Nick felt almost sure, but its nature he could only guess at.

That he was to be made use of as an unconscious instrument seemed plain enough, and the idea filled him with dismay. To be made a dupe of is never pleasant, and the conviction that these men meant to use him as a decoy and leave him to bear the blame if their undertaking failed, made the lad's blood boil as he lay, afraid to stir hand or foot, by the side of the plotters. For his wits had been quicker than those of Pete in detecting the meaning of Greyhound Geordie's plan, and the conclusion to which they jumped seemed all too probable.

This then was the reason of the old man's kindness for which he had felt inclined to be grateful! This was the nature of the services he was required to render in return for his board and lodging! Keen resentment burnt in the lad's heart, as he lay spelling out the meaning of much that had been so hard to understand; and what added poignancy to his feelings was the knowledge that he was, to a great extent, in the power of these three rascals!

Could he have got up and gone away undiscovered, he would have done so there and then; but he could not move without almost certainly awaking his fellow-sleepers. And, if even he could have done

that, he knew that the door of the van was almost always locked at nights, and that the key was under Greyhound Geordie's pillow.

Mrs. Matt, indeed, took it out every morning when she rose to prepare the breakfast, without seriously disturbing his slumbers; but Nick was afraid to run such a risk.

If only he were left alone next day, as he had been on the two previous occasions, he said to himself that he would at once escape from his companions; and it was in the hope that such an opportunity would present itself in the morning that at length he managed to fall asleep.

CHAPTER XXI.

A HANGING BUSINESS.

HOW many of the plans which we make upon our beds, and which seem to us so feasible in the watches of the night, are possible to be carried out in the morning? But a small proportion, I should think, could a reckoning be made.

Broad daylight is the dispeller of many a plan as well as many a dream, and is a great hand at reducing matter of fancy to matter of fact.

And so Nick discovered with respect to his plan. He was never once left alone during the whole of the morning, and, such was the absence of anything

extraordinary in the manner and behaviour of his companions, that he was almost inclined to believe that the conversation he had overheard was nothing but a dream. He might really have ended in so doing had it not been for a whispered warning from Mrs. Matt.

He was helping her to collect some fallen branches which lay under the Scotch firs to the side of the encampment, when, as they were stooping together to raise one of the largest boughs, the woman, after a rapid glance towards the fire, whispered in Nick's ear:

"Ye've done me mair nor yan good turn, lad, while ye've been with us. I'll dae ye yan in return, for I ken ye'll not betray me. The menfolk is plannin' an ill-deed, and they're meanin' to ask yer help. Dinnot give in to them, whativer ye dae, it'll nobbut lead ye to ruin. There now, I've warned ye, and if ye neglect this piece o' advice as ye did the t'other, the blame's yer ain, whativer happens. Whisht! dinnot speak. I canna help ye ony further."

She seized on her end of the branch, and between them, they dragged it to where the men of the party were grouped round the fire.

Nick's heart was beating much faster than it had any right to do, even from dragging a branch so heavy; and when, almost immediately afterwards, the party sat down to a savoury dinner of hare-soup he felt as though every spoonful would choke him.

He began to reflect on the possibility of openly telling his hosts that he could stay with them no longer. But he soon saw that such a proceeding would be as useless as the attempt to escape them at unawares. If his presence was desired by these schemers he would not be allowed to part company with them so easily; and to make such a sudden announcement would only awaken suspicion. No, the old plan was the best, if only it could be carried out, and French leave was all that he was likely to get.

At present there was nothing to be done but to await the turn of events.

Meanwhile, preparations were being made to strike the encampment. The van was re-packed with the articles which had been taken out, and Pete was told to start at sunset, and to go slowly on by a certain road till the rest overtook him.

It wanted about an hour to the time when Greyhound Geordie strolled up to where Nick sat moodily watching the embers of the dying fire, and, sitting down on a log by his side, said, in the most natural way in the world—

"Nick, my lad, that pier bairn in there's vara bad, I doubt. Folks say there's a kind doctor lives at nae great distance from here, whae kens a vast aboot bairns and their badness. Will ye gan and fetch him before we start?"

So the dreaded moment had come! The blood flew to Nick's brain and buzzed in his ears, as he reflected that he was not ready to meet it. He hesitated what to answer, and, during the moment's

pause, he felt that old Geordie was eying him suspiciously. What must he do? Should he refuse at once, or accept the commission, and either make off without executing it, or go to the doctor's house and raise the alarm?

The latter alternative seemed the wiser, and he was about to consent when the wily old plotter cut the ground from under his feet.

"I'll go alang wi' ye, lad," he said, taking silence for consent, or, at all events, appearing to do so; "I've business in that direction mysel'. Indeed, I'd ha' called on t' doctor in passing, but that I doubt his being able to find the road here. He's not been lang in the neighbourhood, ye see, and this spot is a bit out o' t' way. He'll want a guide. Come, we'd better be gannin'."

He rose as he spoke; but Nick did not follow his example. He was racking his brains for a way out of the difficulty in which he found himself, but, as is too commonly the case when an expedient is wanted promptly, none occurred to him.

"Diven't ye hear what I say?" asked Greyhound Geordie, impatiently. "Sittin' still when ye're telt to move is a leaf out o' Pete's book, which I canna sanction. It's quite plenty to have *yan* lazy-bones hangin' aboot. I keep ye here to be useful, and useful ye maun be."

"I've nae mind to be useful i' *that* fashion," answered Nick, sullenly; for the man's tone was arousing his temper and dispelling his prudence at one and the same time.

"D'ye think I feed ye and keep ye to be an ornament to oor establishment?" asked Greyhound Geordie, with sharp sarcasm. "If ye think sae, ye're mightily mistaken. Ye're not sae handsome as arl that comes to! Come, my lad, what ails ye?" he went on, suddenly changing his tone. "It's not like yer usual good-nature to refuse sich an errand as this. I'm requirin' nae hardship."

"Ye're askin' a deal mair than appears," answered Nick, in the same sullen fashion. "I've nae mind to the beesiness, and I winna gan. Nor ye needn't think I've ony wish to eat bread I diven't earn. I'll wish ye good-bye, maister, and gan my ain gait."

"Nay, *that* ye shallna!" returned the old man, angrily. "Ye've cast in yer lot wi' us, and ye maun bide while we require yer services. We canna want (do without) ye yet. I'll gar ye larn whae's maister here, ye young varmint! Do as I tell ye wi'out mair words."

Nick rose. His face was red, and he was trembling with impotent rebellion and rage against the course marked out for him.

"Nay," he cried angrily; "do yer ain dirty work and let me gan. I want nae mair o' the company o' sich as ye!"

"Div ye hear that, lads?" asked Geordie of the other two men who had come up during the altercation and were listening attentively. "Here's ingratitude for favours bestowed! What shall be done to the man who rebels against his captain, eh?"

"I telt ye hoo it would be!" said young Pete, impudently, and he stuck his hands into his pockets and leaned against the van. "Ye'd better have ta'en my advice."

"Ay, and hoo often does yer advice turn out good for onything?" asked the old man, with mingled irritation and scorn. "But that's not the question now. What's to be done, I ask?" He paused for an answer, and, as none came, he broke into derisive laughter.

"Ye canna tell?" he asked scornfully. "I thowt as much! Ye may manish to hit t' reet nail on t' heed yance in a blue moon, Pete, my lad, but I'd give little for yer wits on ninety-nine occasions out o' a hunard. The auld man has to find the ticket, maist times, and sae it is again. Weel, I'll tell ye what we must dae. This lad's manished to scent a rat, somehow, sae we maun mak' sure o' him first. We'll leave him to you, Pete; arrange sae as he canna stir a finger to spoil our pie. As for the messenger, there's naebody but yer missus, Matt. She's but a broken reed to lean on, I ken that. But she'll hev to serve the turn, or we maun dae wi'oot. Give her the instructions yersel', and mind ye impress them. Ye ken weel how to dae *that*, onyhoo!"

Geordie broke into a harsh laugh, as he glanced at the whip which leaned against the shafts of the van.

"Now, look sharp!" he said in conclusion. "Send her to me, and then gan yersel'—ye ken where—

twae minutes after we've started. Now then, Pete, ye're strang enough, onyhoo. Lend us a hand here."

With a rope which he took from his pocket Geordie and Pete bound Nick's hands securely, and gagged him with a handkerchief so that he could not cry out. He struggled a little, but not much, knowing well that he was absolutely powerless in the hands of these ruffians, and that resistance would only bring down summary vengeance on his head.

Having executed this little arrangement in a perfectly cool, business-like fashion, Greyhound Geordie said carelessly to his assistant—

"There! Ye ken where to put him. See he doesna mak' off. If he gies ye ony trouble ye ken the remedy. Start at sunset." Then, turning on his heel, he sauntered off, followed tremblingly by Mrs. Matt.

"Niver fear, maister!" Pete called out after them, with a loud laugh. "He'll be safe enough where I'll put him, and for langer nor he reckons on. There's not mony folks comes this way!"

No sooner was Greyhound Geordie out of sight than the young ruffian seized on his prisoner, forced him back against one of the Scotch firs which grew by the side of the encampment, and bound him securely, hand and foot, to the tree, while Nick stood passively in his hands, utterly unable either to resist or to cry out.

"There!" he said mockingly, as he tied the last knot, "ye can bide there till kingdom come, and serve ye jolly weel too!"

Then he turned away and began to harness the Miller.

What Nick suffered as he stood there bound to the rough red bark of the old Scotch fir it would be hard to overrate. The tightness of the ropes which bound his wrists and ankles stopped the circulation and added the feeling of aching cold to the strain of his position. The desire to call out, not only for help, but to abuse his captors, nearly choked him; and the gag in his mouth added the material element to his mental suffocation.

Nor were the sufferings of the present all. The fear of the future was more terrible still.

As Pete had said, few people came past this lonely spot, and those who did might easily go by without seeing or hearing that he was there. If nobody found him, a lingering and painful death would be the consequence.

The poor lad could scarcely believe, however, that, after all, these late comrades of his would actually go away and leave him to his fate. Bad though they might be, such an act of relentless cruelty seemed hardly credible. His first rage over, he kept watching the movements of Pete, and, much as he hated the sight of him, dreading above all things to see him and the van and the Miller move away and leave him alone.

Now and then he glanced at the sun, which he could see from where he stood nearing the crest of the hill opposite.

He had heard Greyhound Geordie say that sunset was to be the signal for the start, and in a few moments more the sun would set.

The evening was fine but chilly, as evenings in February usually are. A moist wind was blowing, and there were floating vapours beginning to rise from a pond across the road.

Nick shivered. His teeth would have chattered but for the gag.

He watched the round red ball of the sun sink, nearer and nearer, to the jagged crest of the hill, which was rough with whins and bracken. He saw them turn to a rich brown purple under the crimson light, and noticed, as people sometimes do, even under the most trying circumstances, the dark blots formed by those which grew highest up upon the light-laden background of sky.

Pete by this time had quite finished his preparations. The Miller stood in the shafts patiently awaiting the cut of the whip, which was Pete's usual signal to him to start.

The young tinker himself was leaning against the van, playing with the lash of his whip, and watching the sun.

From the inside of the van came at intervals the plaintive wail of the sick child. A rough word from Pete stopped this for a time, but it speedily recurred.

To the captive, standing bound against the tree, it sounded like the voice of his own suffering, which he himself was powerless to express.

As Nick stood there, suffering silently and awaiting sunset with a sickness of heart still worse to bear than the pains of his body, the remembrance of a picture which used to be shown to him as a little boy at school, but which he had long since ceased to think of, came suddenly before the eyes of his mind.

He seemed to see another captive, bound in a position not unlike his own, to something—was it a tree or a beam of wood?—which stood out black against a sunset sky, much as the whin-bushes on the hill were now doing. At first his mind merely saw the picture without perceiving what it represented. Then came the dim memory of a lesson learnt long since, and more than half forgotten, of an all-pitiful Saviour Who suffered for men and their salvation. And, with this memory, there came to the boy's tortured soul a desire to cry for that mercy which his fellows refused him, to a Being Who knows all and pities all. He had been taught a prayer once, as a lesson in school, but he had never used it with any thought of an answer. And now, when in his terrible need he tried to remember it, the words refused to come.

But, though he remembered no words and could not voice his petition, the soul of the lad awoke and cried out in that moment as it never had done before.

For the moment he was dreading had come. The red sun dropped behind the blackness of the hill, Pete cracked his whip, and, without one

backward glance, moved towards the gate which stood ready opened into the lane.

The wheels of the van under the exertions of the old Miller jolted heavily out of the rut they had formed by standing in the moist ground; there was a creaking sound as the axles turned, then driver and horse and van passed out into the lane, and the gate swung to behind them.

As Nick heard the metallic click of the latch a cold dew broke out over all his body, and he felt as though the highest point of his agony was touched. But it was not so. I suppose that there are few of the pains we suffer which have not a deeper pang behind them, which through the goodness of God we may be spared. But for poor tortured Nick this greatest anguish was still to come.

Amidst the fear and misery which he had been feeling all day, he had scarcely given a thought to his faithful little friend Viper. He had not seen the dog since the middle of the afternoon; but as, in spite of her affection for her master, the rabbits which abounded in the neighbourhood were, sometimes, a little too much for Viper's sporting tastes to resist, he had not been much surprised at her absence. Just, however, as the gate closed after the passing of the van, the truant returned to the encampment, and, instantly becoming aware of Nick's plight, began a series of vain endeavours to pull him away. Failing even to obtain a caress or a word from the object of her ardent affections,

the poor little terrier went nearly frantic, and set up the most piteous howls and yelps.

The uproar was so great that Nick was just beginning to hope that some one would hear it and come to his assistance, when a step in the lane reached his ears.

His heart gave a great leap of thankfulness, and he turned his eyes wistfully in the direction of the sound. It came nearer and nearer, and at last the gate opened. Then his heart sank again like lead, for the person who came through was no other than Pete. He had his driving-whip in his hand, and as soon as he came within distance he broke out with an oath and began lashing at Viper. She eluded him for some time; but her care for her master was greater than that for her own safety, and she refused either to be silenced or driven away.

No love had ever been lost between the terrier and the tinker; and now her resistance and his attacks roused the hatred which smouldered in each to absolute ferocity. Growls and oaths were freely exchanged in this singular duel between dog and man. But, for some time, neither succeeded in actually touching the other.

At last, however, the enraged terrier saw her opportunity, and, darting behind her antagonist, she fastened her teeth in his leg.

With a yell of rage the tinker seized her by the neck, and succeeded in choking her off by pressing her throat with both his hands. The success of

this treatment, probably, suggested the doom of the faithful little animal, which, perhaps, was sealed by the flash of triumph which Pete fancied he detected in Nick's eye, as he watched Viper's teeth close on her antagonist's flesh.

Looking on at the struggle without being able to lift a finger in his favourite's defence, Nick saw the brutal Pete taking a rope from his pocket with one hand, while with the other he held up Viper by the scruff of the neck. Slipping a running noose round the terrier's throat, he proceeded to attach the other end of the rope to the branch of a tree close by that to which Nick was fastened.

The captive lad saw the dog's faithful brown eyes turn towards him in anguished appeal. If ever eyes spoke with the eloquence of love and entreaty and despair they were those of the rough little mongrel terrier in that moment of supremest need.

To witness this dumb appeal, and to be utterly unable to respond to it, was the drop which caused the wanderer's cup of suffering to be filled to the very brim.

With a frenzied longing to interfere in her behalf and to take a deadly revenge upon her enemy and his own, Nick struggled violently to wrench himself loose from the cords which bound him. But they only cut his flesh to the bone, and caused the blood to flow from his bare wrists and trickle down the bole of the old Scotch fir. Nor were Viper's struggles less futile. One long howl of fear and

agony struggled out from the closing throat of the poor little terrier, the next moment her little sandy body was twitching in the death-struggle at the end of the rope, which was now firmly fastened to the branch of a tree in full view of her helpless master.

Having accomplished his fiendish task, Pete stood for a moment as though enjoying the agony of his two victims.

"There!" he said, with a mocking laugh, "ye're both safe enough now, I guess. Neither o' ye'll hev much chance o' raisin' an alarm. That tyke there'll niver speak again, bad luck to it for an ill-conditioned little mongrel! And as for *you*, my lad"—he shook his fist in Nick's face—"ye'd ha' been at t' rope-end, and arl, if *my* advice had been taken. Be hanged to you for an interferin', hypocritical cur! You and yer tyke are a nice pair, and ye'd only be reet served if ye dangled together. Well, good e'en to you, my gentlemen!"

He took off his cap and made a bow to his two victims, with a jeering smile on his impudent face, after which he turned his back on their sufferings and once more disappeared through the gate.

As his tormenter went away Nick shut his aching eyes. He could not bear to watch the death-agony of the faithful creature which was losing its life by reason of its love and fidelity to himself. The sight of the small, quivering body and twitching paws, of the starting, glazing eyes, still turned on him in their agony, as though love were stronger

even than death, were far worse to him than any sufferings of his own. His heart was wrung beyond endurance, and the sense of his powerlessness maddened him. Oh, to be able to wrench himself free before it was too late, to cry out, even, for the help which it seemed so hopeless to expect!

Rendered desperate by the knowledge that in a few minutes more all must be over with his little friend, Nick once more strained with all the power of his young body against the bonds which secured him. The cords held; but his struggles were so far successful that the position of the gag was shifted.

Through the fast-deepening twilight one awful, strangled cry rang out upon the silence, then all was again still.

CHAPTER XXII.

MODERN MOSS-TROOPERS.

THERE is a proverb which says that "When need is highest, help is nighest." This is, perhaps, not true on every occasion; but there is no need to cavil at the saying on that account. Like all proverbs it embodies a general truth; and if the occasions which it fits could be compared with those which it fails to meet, the former, I venture to think, would be found to outnumber the latter.

We who believe in a special Providence which overrules even the fall of a sparrow, may be scorned

as "old-fashioned" by many of the would-be wise of this sceptical ebbing century. But scorn is not proof, and till those can prove their case who assert that God never interferes to save His creatures in their hour of need, they must not be surprised if we keep our belief, and go on quoting the old saw which heads this chapter.

The history of the two unluckly dogs whose adventures we are now following, affords a striking proof on our side of the question, and one which one at least of the pair was fond of quoting in after-days.

Whether the other did as much among her equals is more than I can say. Maybe, it was unnecessary to take the trouble; for, so far as my observation goes, the canine race excels mankind in that simple faith which neither doubts nor questions. If we could trust our Master with the same unfailing belief in His goodness and wisdom which the very dogs are willing to give to theirs, it strikes me that we should be wiser and better than we are. Now for what happened on the evening in question.

Though it seemed to Nick that a long time passed between the closing of the gate into the lane by Pete the Tinker and its next opening, in reality it could have been but a few minutes.

The hill, with its fringe of whin-bushes, had grown but a shade blacker against the sunset sky. The sky itself had lost but little of its liquid gold and crimson; and the waste bit of ground under the shelter of the Scotch firs had gathered only a few

more shadows when steps came down the road which ran outside the hedge.

They were many steps, quite an army-like tramp, indeed, though no army that respects itself ever marched in such irregular order as did the troop which now tramped down our lane.

But no army marching to the relief of a beleagured city was ever more welcome; for, in another minute, Death the besieger must have had his way with one at least of the helpless bodies which life was struggling so desperately to keep.

And what was the approaching army? If you had looked over the hedge you might have felt puzzled at first, for the light was getting very uncertain. What you would have seen would have been a medley of shaggy-looking heads, with tufts upon them, some black, some dun, some red; and, above these, double the number of pointed weapons, each one curved, sharp, and formidable-looking.

In the fast-gathering twilight you might have been excused for fancying you were back in the old moss-trooping days, and that what you were looking down upon was a medley of plumed helmets and an assortment of offensive weapons which had grown crooked through much service. But, of course, the illusion could not have lasted long; and you would have, presently, discovered that these seeming moss-troopers, pressing along this Scottish lane towards the Borders, were but a troop of Highland cattle, horned and shaggy, and wild-looking, as these brave little sons of the mountains are wont to be.

Behind them rode the captain of this warlike little band, an old drover, namely, with a plaid over his shoulders and a Glengarry cap upon his white hair, which was every bit as shaggy as that of the shaggiest of his troop.

He, in his turn, was followed by a Highland collie, a mass of grey hair as long and unkempt as that of the rest.

The advance-guard of these modern moss-troopers had nearly reached the gate leading into the piece of ground where the encampment had been, when that strangled cry, which harrowed our ears at the end of the last chapter, broke upon the silent air. The old drover immediately turned his head in the direction from which it had come, saw the gate in the hedge, forced his shaggy grey pony towards it, dismounted, and, hitching his bridle over the gate-post, opened the gate hurriedly and entered the bit of ground.

He was, in fact, already on the alert, for the dog's cry of fear and pain a few minutes before had, also, reached his ears as he rode along the lane, and he had been listening out for another.

The canine cry might, possibly, have been disregarded; but the human cry which followed it was much too urgent not to meet with immediate response.

Once inside the gate, the old drover turned his head sharply this way and that, failing at first in the deepening gloom to see whence the cry proceeded. But Nick, becoming aware of some one near,

though his senses were fast failing him, managed to utter another sound which brought the old man at once to the Scotch firs, at the foot of which the tragedy was in progress.

With an exclamation of horror, the old man whipped out a big clasp-knife, opened it with trembling fingers, and proceeded to remove the handkerchief and to cut the cords which bound the hands of the boy. But no sooner was one of Nick's hands free than he pointed, with such energy as its stiffness would allow of, to the adjoining tree, where the body of poor Viper was now hanging, limp and motionless.

He could not speak; he could only point, but this he did with such a look of agonized entreaty in his bloodshot eyes, that the old man, after a moment's hesitation, turned his attention to the companion sufferer. It needed but one cut from the knife's sharp blade to sever the cord by which the unfortunate little terrier was hanging, but the unloosening of the noose about its neck was a rather more lengthy business, and Nick, still bound and helpless, watched it with a feeling of sickening impatience.

He was, by this time, growing so faint that the additional torture of this moment of suspense was more than the strain on his nerves could endure. The little light which remained in the air seemed to thicken and tremble before him, as he watched the old man's efforts to undo the noose round the neck of his only friend. Then flashes of brightness,

which were certainly not there, threaded the darkness, as with a net-work of flame. There came a sound in his ears, low at first as the distant stirring of the wind among the trees, then growing louder and louder till it rose into a roar.

Was it a real storm crashing through the broad, black crowns of the old firs above his head, and making the rough, red bole to which he was bound sway backwards and forwards with his body, as though the tree and he must certainly fall together? Nick did not know, but it seemed to him as though the storm and the darkness swallowed him. The man who had come to his rescue vanished from sight, together with Viper and everything around. He was conscious of a feeling as though life itself were ebbing from him, and clutched at the rough bark of the old Scotch fir with the hand which had been freed, thinking to drag himself back from an abyss which was yawning before him. After that, sensation stopped altogether, and he knew no more.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

OUTSIDE in the lane the rough little moss-troopers had come to a halt, and were making the best of their opportunities, as good campaigners should always do.

Some of them were ruminating over the results of

their last browsing, standing at ease in the middle of the road.

Others had put their sturdy little forefeet on to the bank, at the top of which grew the hedge, and were cropping the scanty blades of grass which had managed to sprout in that sheltered place.

The collie had changed his position and was not standing, but sitting on guard in front of the troop. His hairy grey ears were erect, and his vigilant eyes, twinkling beneath the shaggy thatch which overshadowed them, like stars under a wisp of cloud, were following the movements of his charges.

The pony stood still by the gate, resting its hoary nose against the topmost bar, and raising alternately one tired hoof after the other, so that each leg might have a holiday in turn. His eyes were looking towards the plot of ground inside, where his old master was bending his stiff knees over what seemed to be two lifeless forms stretched side by side upon the grass.

Not that the old pony could see them plainly. It was not light enough for eyes to travel so far. But he knew that his master was there, and that business was detaining him, and that was enough for Shag.

The poor old drover, indeed, was finding this piece of business, which had so unexpectedly cropped up to detain him, of a nature to tax his utmost powers.

Old Colin Campbell—for such was his distinguished name—never remembered to have met with

such an adventure on any of the hundreds of occasions that he had driven a herd of Highland cattle from his native hills to the Borders, since the time that he was a "bit laddie" up to this very evening. He was beginning to be at his wits' end what to do with a fainting boy on one hand, and what he was well-nigh convinced was nothing but a dead dog on the other, when, at length, after several attempts to force some water down his throat, his human patient showed signs of life. He gasped, swallowed, gasped again, and, finally, opened his eyes and stared up into the old face which was bending over him.

"It's Greyhound Geordie," Nick murmured, his senses, though on the way home, being still a long way off. "Tell Pete—he's—he's——"

He broke off, half sat up, and looked wildly around him. Then seeming suddenly to remember, stretched out his hands and pushed against the old man with all his strength.

"Dinna touch me!" he cried hoarsely. "Let me gan! Oh, let me be!"

"Hoots, laddie! I'm no wantin' to harm ye," was the encouraging answer. "Ye've been sair mishandled, nae doot, but not by me. Here, tak' a drappie mair, and try to stand. It'll dae ye nae ill, lad. It's nobbut guid spring water. There! ye're better the noo?"

He certainly was. But, nevertheless, Nick neither gave answer or thanks to his kindly deliverer. His own senses back, he was thinking of his fellow-sufferer.

"Where's Viper—the dog?" he added, by way of explanation. "Ye've niver left her to hang, have ye?"

He looked anxiously up at the black mass of the great Scotch firs which the dusk was quickly swallowing.

"Nay, laddie. I nearly allooed ye to dee yersel' by reason o' attendin' to her," answered the old man. "She's here, puir wee thing, but I doubt she'll spak nae mair!"

He pointed to where Viper's rough little body lay on the grass, looking in the darkness like a patch of sand.

With a deep catch of the breath Nick staggered to his feet, and then threw himself down by the side of his poor little friend. He spoke to her; he caressed her; he even stooped over her soft little head, and kissed her between the eyes just as though no stranger had been looking on to see him. But Viper never moved. Never before had he spoken to her without a wag of that rope-like tail and an answering light, which he could have sworn was a smile, in those soft brown eyes. Now the tail lay limp upon the ground, and the dull, starting eyes showed no spark of recognition.

The little pink tongue, which had so often licked his hand in loving recognition of his least caress, was painfully protruding from the black lips about which the froth had gathered.

Few that saw her would not have said with old Colin Campbell that Viper would never "spak"

again. Her last word seemed to have been uttered when she yielded up her poor little life in defence of her master.

Then Nick seemed to forget himself altogether. He forgot that at sixteen a boy's crying days are supposed to be over. He forgot that his own life had just been saved, and that the man who had rescued him was standing by. He forgot everything but that the only creature who loved him was lying, apparently beyond hope of revival, at his feet, and that with her he lost the only friend he had in the world.

Tortured and weak and wretched his misery rolled like a flood upon him. He let his head drop on the motionless body of the little terrier, clasped his stiff arms about her neck, and broke into such sobs as alarmed the drover.

"Viper!" he moaned. "Oh, Viper, lass! Are ye quite quite dead? Oh, I *canna* want (do without) ye, I canna!"

Did the little faithful creature in some far away country, whither her loving spirit had fled, hear the voice of her beloved friend and turn back to earth? Or was there still a living dog left in that limp, hairy body, over which Nick was weeping such bitter tears, to revive under the warmth of his touch?

Let dog-lovers answer this question each according to his views. I can only tell you what I know to have actually happened. Suddenly a quiver passed through the apparently lifeless body which Nick was straining to his breast, and, in another

moment, the dim, brown eyes had given him such a look of love as no human eyes could possibly excel, while the little pink tongue made a feeble effort to lick his cheek.

There could be no doubt about it; Viper was coming round.

"I've aye been told that terriers dies hard," said the kindly voice of the old drover. "And noo I see for mysel' that they're hard to kill. I never came across a tyke seemingly more dead than this. And yet, see, she'll soon be fresher than ye'll be yersel', lad!"

And old Colin Campbell was right; for Viper came round much more quickly than her master did.

The old man looked at his patients, doubting what to do.

The boy continued to kneel on the ground caressing his regained treasure, and seemingly conscious of little besides. He volunteered no explanation as to the plight in which he and his dog had been found, nor yet did he make the least attempt to move on. Night, however, was falling rapidly, and the old drover had himself and his cattle to think of.

"Lad," he said at last, "I dinna ken what ye may be, or where ye live, to say naethin' aboot how ye came to be as I fund ye the noo. It's gettin' late, and I'm boun' to be takin' the road again, sae as to reach the place where me and the beasts are to spend the nicht. But I dinna like to leave ye in the condeetion ye are wi'out speerin' whether ye've

freen's nigh han', or if there's onything mair I can dae to help ye."

Nick looked up at that. He could not see the kindly face of the old man with much distinctness, for, with every moment, it was growing darker; but there was something in the voice which bespoke a good man and true.

"Maister," he said sorrowfully, "I've nae heame and nae friends, and if I bide here the villains whae bound me 'll, mebbe, come back, and then——" He broke off with a shudder.

Old Colin reflected.

To take a lad, of whom he knew nothing, along with him would be vastly inconvenient. Yet, to abandon these helpless creatures to the fate from which he had rescued them seemed utterly impossible to his kindly heart. He looked towards his pony, whose grey form glimmered through the darkness as he stood at the gate, and made up his mind.

"Come," he said as cheerfully as he could, "try and get on to the galloway, and I'll pit yer tyke on the saddle afore ye. I'll tak' ye alang wi' me as far as to where we put up for the nicht, onyhow. After that we must see what's best to be done."

With some difficulty, for his limbs felt stiff and maimed, and his strength was low, Nick scrambled to the old drover's seat on the pony's back, taking Viper, who was not yet in a condition to run, in front of him. Then old Colin called to his dog, shouted to his shaggy troop, and the cavalcade

moved on again, along the lane and out into the wider turnpike which lay about a mile beyond.

The progress made with a herd of cattle is always slow, but to-night it was more tedious even than usual; for the cattle disliked the march in the dark, and their drover was more used to riding than walking. But the grey collie, by dint of much barking, kept the herd moving together along the road, the old drover stumping after them in spite of rheumatic knees.

Then the stars came out overhead and lit up the night with their myriads of fairy lamps, and as Nick jogged along on the grey pony, with Viper sleeping on the saddle in front of him, he kept looking up to where the Dog-star shone more brilliantly than all its twinkling neighbours, and wondering drowsily over what Greyhound Geordie had told him respecting it.

Could there be anything in what the old rascal had said? And if so, did it apply to him? Truly, if he were born under that star, the boy concluded, as he began to nod for very weakness and weariness in the saddle, it must be the most unlucky of all the stars. For unless, indeed, it were little Viper, it seemed to him that he was the unluckiest dog alive. That he *was* still alive, and the terrier as well, in spite of all their troubles, was a little fact which Nick, in common with a great many unthankful mortals, altogether left out of the reckoning.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A GOOD OFFER.

"*Whew-w-w!*"

Old Colin Campbell was sitting at breakfast, next morning, in a little hostelry on the outskirts of Jedborough, much frequented by drovers like himself.

A bright fire was burning in the great open fireplace of the old-fashioned, stone-floored room where his breakfast had been laid. The old fellow's chair was drawn up close beside it, and one of his large-veined hands was spread out to the blaze, while with the other he held a newspaper before the spectacles which framed his kindly old eyes. Close by him was set a round table covered with a clean, coarse cloth, on which were arranged three deep plates, three spoons, and three blue basins filled with creamy milk. The porridge-pan bubbled over the fire, watched attentively by two shaggy collie-dogs, one tawny, one grey.

The grey collie we have seen before. It belongs to the old drover by the fire. The other seems to be an acquaintance, by the way in which it is treated by our shaggy friend; but it is a stranger to us.

The dogs looked up at the sound which begins this chapter. Their shaggy ears were pricked and they looked inquiringly at the drover. Apparently

they took the sound for a whistle of some kind, and imagined it was addressed to them. Yet it was not the sort of whistle by which men usually spoke to them, and they were puzzled by it. The tawny collie gave a little *sotto voce* "wuff!" of dog inquiry. The grey one got up slowly, and laid a grizzled muzzle upon his master's knee, looking into his face with a pair of yellow, questioning eyes.

The old man stroked the grey head of his trusty assistant mechanically. But he did not speak. He seemed to be quite absorbed in his paper. Finding that he was not required for anything in particular, the grey-coated herdsman, after civilly pausing to receive the caress, returned to the interesting occupation of watching the porridge-pan. Presently, the door opened, and the landlady, an elderly dame, in an old-fashioned white mutch, came bustling in.

"Weel, Mestre Campbell, and hoo's a' wi' you, the day?" she asked, as she shifted the porridge-pan back from the fire. "Ye're earlier astir nor yer laddie. I'd gar him fodder the beasts for me, if I were in your shoes, Mestre Campbell. Auld folk should spare themsel's, ye ken. I'd like a deal better to hear you snorin' in bed nor that laddie!"

"He's no just sae weel, Mestress Wilson," said the old man, absently, without lifting his eyes from the paper.

"Had awa' wi' ye! No just weel? Mebbe, that micht be true, last nicht. He lookit white-like and weary eneuch when ye brocht him in, Mestre Campbell, and I didna grudge the het possit I

made for him. But the day? Na, na, he's as fresh-lookin' as a newly pu'ed apple, for I lookit in to see him an hour agone. Ye micht weel hae wakkened him and sent him oot to fodder the beasts. Why, what's keepin' Mestre Flemming a' this time? He went oot soon efter yersel', and he isn't in yet. The parritch is spoilin', Mestre Campbell. I wadna wait on them, gin I was you."

Talking all the time, the dame had poured out a plate of the steaming porridge and placed it before her guest. The two dogs had followed her movements attentively with their eyes. But not so the old man. He seemed neither to have heard what she was saying, nor seen what she was doing. She stood a few moments watching him, her arms akimbo on either side of her solidly proportioned waist.

"Weel," she said presently, with a little toss of her white-mutched head, and an ill-pleased look on a face whose every line was evidently more fitted to express good-temper — "weel, Mestre Campbell, what ails ye at the parritch the day, that ye're no eatin' it? Folks doesna use to neglect *my* victuals that gait. Ye'd better have said 'breakfast at aucht,' rayther than siven, if ye're no ready for it when it's ready for you. Hech, sirs, if that isna yon lad still snorin'! I'll away cry up the stair till him, and to Mestre Flemming as weel, that ye're waitin' breakfast on them. It's weel to be ceevil, Mestre Campbell, but a body may

cairy ceevility overfar; and to leave guid parritch to cool, that gait, *is* overfar, to *my* thinkin'!"

The old drover laid aside his newspaper with a little sigh. His landlady's words had reached his ears at last. They could hardly fail to do so, for, by this time, she had put her threat into execution, and "crying" aloud, first up the stairs and then out of the door that "Breakfast was waitin', and Mestre Campbell was no' willin' to start, wantin' the lave o' the gentlemen!"

"There, never heed, Mestress Wilson," said Colin, penitently, as she returned, a little red-faced and flustered, to the fireside. "I didna hear ye spak'. I ken yer parritch is over-guid for a body to let it spoil. I'm ready now. It was the news in the paper, ye see."

"Ay, sae ye say," answered Mistress Wilson, still but half propitiated. "But what's the papers to guid victuals like yon? Papers will keep, but no the parritch—not *het*, that is. Here, let be—I'll feed the tykes (dogs). See hoo they're watchin' the yettlin'! (big black pot). *They* ken fine what's guid, onyhow. They're, whiles, sensibler nor men-folks, is the beasts, to *my* thinkin'!"

And, indeed, it seemed that this was so, so far as breakfast went, that morning. For the two collies attacked the porridge immediately it was set before them, and showed their appreciation of Mistress Wilson's cookery by finishing their portion before old Colin had got through more than a very few spoonfuls of his.

He had made but a very small indentation into the smooth coast-line of the milk-surrounded island, with which Mistress Wilson had filled his plate, when the outer door opened and a man came in.

He wore a plaid, and was dressed much like Colin himself. But instead of being old, he was hardly middle-aged, and instead of being, as Campbell was, half Highland, half Lowland, he was a Lowlander pure and simple.

"I'm a bit late," he said, stating a self-evident fact by way of making an apology, as people often do, and unwinding his plaid the while. "But the toon's full o' the news o' last nicht's beesiness, I could hardlys get awa'."

"The burglary at Dr. Pritchard's?" asked the old drover; and he took up the paper he had been studying and pointed to a heading in large letters. "Ay, I've joost been readin' aboot it. It's been a vara bad beesiness, hasna it? Onything mair been made oot sin' this was prentit?" He touched the paper with one large forefinger.

"I havena seen the accoont," replied the other drover, supping up the half-cold porridge with noisy haste. "I'll tak' a look when I win through this. There's been overmickle breath coolin' the parritch, this mornin', I'm thinkin'!" he added with a short laugh. "They're as cauld as loch-water on a frosty mournin'! That lassie o' Pritchard's must hae gotten a mon's heart in her bit body to make the fecht she did. He'll be a lucky lad that gets her. Eh, Cammel?"

"What's that aboot the lassie?" asked his companion, pausing, with his spoon half-way to his mouth, to put the question. "It says nought aboot a lassie where I was readin'."

"Disn't it noo? Mebbe, that paper was prentit afore a' thae particulars cam' to han'. It's Pritchard's servant-lassie I was speakin' aboot; she that's dochter to auld Graham, ain o' the duke's keepers. Ye'll ken him likely? No? Weel, he's nigh dune noo, but he's been a gran' mon in his time, and mony's the fecht he's had wi' poachers. It's the faither o' her she gets her speerit frae, ye see."

"But what has she dune, mon? That's what I'm wantin' to ken," asked the elder drover; and he nodded, as he spoke, to Nick, who, followed by Viper, came downstairs at the moment.

"Come, lad, set to," he went on, signing towards the third place at the table, and then looking towards his fellow-drover to hear more.

"Ou, ay, I thowt I'd telt ye," answered the man addressed. "It was this way, ye see. Ane o' the gang—a woman-body, as folks is sayin'—decoyed awa' the doctor, as if to veesit her sick bairn, and when he was gone, and there was naebody but the lassie in the hoose, forbye his auld mither, the burglars gat in. The doctor, ye see, is thinkin' o' gettin' maryit shortly, and the hoose was full o' weddin'-presents—maistly siller tea-pots, spoons, and forks, and sich-like, given him by freen's and patients, for he's weel likit, is Dr. Pritchard. Weel,

as I was sayin', the auld leddie and the bit lassie were their lane i' the hoose. The auld leddie's deef and blind, and disn't coont, sae it was the lassie again' twa men, wi' nae mair scruples than"—he paused for a simile—"than ye've teeth i' yer hed, Mester Cammel, if ye'll alloo me to say sae. Weel, the siller was a' in the doctor's surgery, and when the lassie went ben to set a light to the fire, as she'd hed her orders to do, there were the thieves on their knuckle-bones, packin' the things into a poke. They didna hear her come, and she never let wit she was there by sae muckle as ane skirl (scream). Hoo mony lasses wad hae hodden their whisht (kept silence) like that, I ask ye? She joost took up the loaded revolver which the doctor is accustomed to keep on his table, and she cockit it at the rascals, and 'Drop that, or I'll fire!' she says, as bold as brass. But they didn't believe the pistol was loaded, and they joost laucht at her, as they up wi' the sack and made ready to bolt the same way they had come, through the winder. She fired at the foremost, wha happened to be an auld man, and doon he went like a felled bullock. But the next minute, he was up again, and out through the winder. The t'other, wha was holdin' the hinder end of the sack—they were bearin' it together, ye see,—droppit it and made off likewise. The police is after them, but there's naen o' them ta'en yet; and the lass can say but little as to their looks, for she never saw their faces. Folks says that they're travellin' tinkers (by way of, that is) and——

Why, lad, what ails ye? Ye sudna choke like that upo' cauld parritch! Tak' a sup o' milk. Canny noo, ye'll be better directly."

Nick, indeed, was choking violently; but it was not altogether the porridge that was the cause. The story to which he had listened touched him closely; but, fearing his connection with the burglars might bring him into difficulties, the instinct of the moment prompted him to dissemble his interest, and to appear as though absorbed in finishing his breakfast as quickly as possible. And these things, being contrary the one to the other, had produced the result mentioned.

Old Colin Campbell, who had been observing the lad all the while, kept his eyes upon him still, as, following Wilson's directions, he began to recover. But he made no spoken observation till the other drover, having finished his breakfast and his story, paid his reckoning, called his dog, and, nodding farewell to Campbell, went out. Then taking up his porridge-plate, which still contained more of Mistress Wilson's cookery than he cared for her to see, he put it on the floor in front of Viper, who was wistfully eyeing the empty dish which had served the two collies, saying—

"We'll no move till the wee doggie has had her share. Ye'll have time to tell me aboot last nicht, laddie. If I'm richt i' my thowts, ye ken a bit mair aboot thae thieves than onybody dis as yet—even the police. Nay, ye needna be feared, laddie," he went on, observing the boy's reluctance. "There's

naebody ever lippened (trusted) to auld Colin that's had cause to repent it. I've had a bit experience in readin' faces during ma time, for mony's the folk o' a' sorts and condeetions I've come across on my travels, and if ye're a bad 'un, I read ye wrang. Come, oot wi't! I'll, mebbe, be able to stan' yer freen'."

Thus adjured, Nick looked at the massive, weather-beaten face of the old Scot more closely, saw the honest, kindly grey eyes under their shaggy brows, the mouth, cut for truth and gentleness, in spite of its present wreck through want of teeth, and the calm serenity of the wrinkled brow, and, seeing, believed in the man before him.

Little Viper was not very long in clearing the porridge-plate; but, before she had done, old Colin knew, not only the lad's experiences with the burglars, but the general outline of his unfortunate life. He might even have been persuaded to open his heart on the subject which was most oppressing it—namely, his fears respecting Teddy,—had Viper been a little longer over her breakfast. But, while he was hesitating whether or not he should speak of the immediate cause of his leaving Bellister and the terrible night which had followed upon it, the last bit of that island of porridge was engulfed by the terrier. She looked up and wagged her tail.

Old Colin rose stiffly from his chair.

"Weel, laddie," he said, "it's time we were movin'. I canna mind havin' been sae late in startin' for mony a day. But there, the rheumatics has hould

o' me this mornin', and movin's no sae easy. Look here, my lad, I'll mak' ye a proposal. *Ye*'re in need o' a freen', and *I*'d be better o' an assistant —for a bit, at ony rate. Will ye gan along o' me? I'm bound to Ca'lisle Auction-mart, and there's nae time to lose by the way. Weel, is it a bargain?"

Nick's eyes glistened. The real kindness of the offer could not be mistaken. But the lad was so unused to kindness that he hardly knew how to receive it. A lump, which was, also, unusual, rose in his throat, and checked his answer.

"It's a regular hirin', ye ken," added the old drover, noticing the momentary hesitation, and, in spite of his knowledge of men, mistaking the cause. "Ye needna fear but ye'll get yer wage. What d'ye say—a shellin' a day and yer keep? It's no muckle, I ken that, but——"

"I diven't want yer brass!" burst out poor Nick, in a choked voice. "Ye're over-good to sich as me. If ye nobbut kent——"

"There, there, laddie, say nae mair! It's joost a matter o' mutual convenience, that's what it is," said old Colin, breaking in upon the lad's halting acknowledgment, and winding his plaid about his own stalwart figure as he spoke. "Gang and fetch the beasts while I saddle Shag. Had awa', Kelt, me man! Ye're to gang wi' that lad. He kens ilka word I say til him, dis Kelt," added the old man, a slow smile breaking over his weather-beaten face as he watched the intelligent movements of his dog.

But still Nick hesitated. He was looking at Viper, about whom no word had been said.

"I canna leave her," he said slowly, as old Colin was walking towards the room where Mistress Wilson was usually to be found.

"What, lad? What's that?" he asked, rather sharply, thinking that the lad was making some objection.

Nick repeated his words.

The old man laughed kindly.

"Ay, ay, lad, we'll tak' her along wi' us, if she'll behave hersel' wi' the beasts. 'Love me, love my dog,' eh? And I like ye the better for't too!"

And so the matter was settled.

CHAPTER XXV.

SOUR GRAPES.

"THEY'LL be wantin' ye for a witness, likely, now they've cotched the auld thief, or what they *tuke* to be him. I had the news from a packman while ye were watering the beasts at yon trough. Mebbe, I did wrang in fetchin' ye awa' frae Jedbro'."

The party were well on their way by this time. The old town on the Tweed, with its beautiful ruined abbey, had vanished into the grey mists which are apt to blur a northern horizon on the afternoon of a day towards the end of February.

The sun was shining down in fitful fashion from

a low grey sky, well curtained by clouds with mother-o'-pearl-like edges, which were drawn back, now and then, to show the blue which lay behind, in case, as it seemed, the world should forget that it still was there.

The sturdy little moss-troopers were plodding along a rough moorland road, with miles of heather rolling away, dark and ragged, toward the grey of the horizon. A clump of Scotch firs, with gaunt, wind-twisted arms outstretched to the lowering sky, stood out on a ridge to the left. A brown burn brawled over its rocky bed in a gully to the right. A few home-going rooks, flying heavily through the moist air, were the only signs of life, with th exception of the travellers themselves, in the wide wintry landscape.

Old Colin Campbell, with his bonnet drawn down over his wrinkled forehead, rode his shaggy grey pony in the rear of the troop. By his side trudged Nick, looking, in his velveteen cast-offs, like some gamekeeper turned tramp.

Kelt and Viper, an odd pair indeed, followed peacefully behind. For the moss-troopers needed no herding just then. Their dun and red and black little bodies were marching along in good order—for a troop of such irregulars as they. Their shaggy heads carried their formidable weapons, pointed resolutely towards England, as their compatriots had done many a time and oft in the days when Scotland never crossed the Border unarmed.

Neither the old drover nor his new assistant had

spoken for several hours before the former made the remark which you have read above.

Nick had not been thinking of his present surroundings. His thoughts had gone back to Bellister, and, when his companion spoke, he was wondering what Meggie was doing just then. It must be nearly time for watering the cows. Who did it, he wondered, now he was no longer there? Who helped her with the milking? And what did she *now* think of the poor lad who had always been her willing slave?

It was just at this point that Colin's remark broke in upon his reflections.

He started and looked towards the speaker, and the old man had to repeat his words.

"Stay in Jedbro' to be a witness? Nay, maister, that's the vara reason I want to be out on't!"

"Why? Ye're no reflectin', laddie, I think, that ilka guid ceetizen is boun' to dae what he can to help in bringin' creeminals to justice. Mebbe, havin' shared bite and sup wi' those graceless men, ye're no joost willin' to spak' again' them? Weel, the feelin' dis ye justice. But feelin's maunna stan' i' the way o' duty. If ye'd spak' up yester-nicht, trouble might hae been saved. I'm no blamin' ye for that, however, seein' ye were dazed wi' bad usage. But if yer testimony is wanted when the trial comes on, ye'll joost have to gie it wi'out respect o' persons."

Old Colin said this with solemn gravity, almost as though he were a judge himself, addressing the

jury in a court of justice, and every word fell heavily on the ears of the lad who walked beside him.

Nick's conscience accused him, also, of a crime; and it seemed to him that, if only the old man knew of that act of violence committed by him under the Roman Wall, not even his kind heart would be allowed to interfere with this stern sense of duty, and that he, Nick, would, in his turn, be delivered up to justice. He looked towards the old drover and quailed under the searching look of his kindly eye.

"Weel," said Colin, compassionately, "I'll no say mair tae ye at present. It may happen ye'll never be called; only remember if ye are, spak' the truth, my laddie. It's the only way. Puir bairn!" he went on, half to himself, as he watched Nick's hangdog look. "He's for a' the world like a tyke that's been used to nothin' but cuffs and bats and kicks frae the time he was littered! He's aye expectin' anither frae ilka body he comes near. I verily believe he's maist afraid o' auld Colin next! Laddie," he continued, turning to Nick, "ye've had a hard life, I can see that, but ye maunna lose heart, or fancy the warld is made wantin' the sunshine arltogether. Luik there, laddie, luik there!"

He pointed to where the westering sun had opened for itself a fold in the pearl-grey curtain that, for some time past, had shut it in, and was glinting down upon the dead heather of the desolate

moor. A long band of yellow light was spreading, like a smile, around the place where the sunset was presently to be, and the brawling burn to the right of the party had caught the reflection, and was flashing it back into the face of the peeping sun, like a frolicsome child at play with its father.

Nick's sad eyes followed the direction of the old man's finger, but no answering smile was seen in them.

"There's some folk niver has a chance," he answered sullenly. "Them that's born wi' a bad name keeps it, sae far as I ken."

"Till they win a better, laddie," was the gentle answer. "It's a hard fecht, I ken that, when a' the warld's again' ye; but it's no impossible gin ye only persevere."

Nick looked at the old drover with an expression in his eyes which went to his companion's heart, so heavy and hopeless was it for a lad of his years.

"Ay, but if the bad's *born* in ye," he said slowly, "hoo aboot that?"

"There's bad born in us a', laddie," replied Colin, looking thoughtfully away to where the band of yellow light was steadily spreading on the western horizon. "We're a' leavened wi' Adam's sin. But there's anither leaven working again' that, my lad, and has been ever sin' the Son o' God joined His nature unto ours. See yon licht, hoo it's drivin' awa' the clouds? Good's boun' to get the better o' bad i' the lang run; for God is stronger nor the muckle deil; I've proved it mysel'."

"Ay, but it's easy to talk when a man comes o' good stock, as I mak' nae doot ye do, Maister Campbell. But when yan's faither and moother is—yan disna ken *what*"—a little shudder ran through the lad as the image of Tramping Sal rose before his mind's eye—"it's a vara different matter."

For a minute or two the old drover did not answer, and Nick began to think that he had silenced him. He himself had come to consider that a case like his was hopeless. But to find that this genial old man, who appeared ready to make the best of most things, was likely to agree with him, seemed to make it more hopeless still. He looked wistfully at Colin, who was sitting his old pony in a brown study. After what seemed to Nick a very long pause, the old man spoke.

"Ay, it's a hard case, yon," he said slowly. "I'm aye wae for bairns like that, for there's nae doot but that this warld's made the harder for them by the sins o' their forbears. Yon's what the Scriptur' means when it says, 'Veesitin' the sins o' the faithers upo' the children, unto the third and fourth generation.'".

"It's unjust, it's cruel unjust!" burst out the boy, with a catch of the breath. He had been chewing the cud of this hard saying ever since he had begun to think at all of the problems of life, and his young soul was beginning to rebel against his bitter experience of its truth.

"Laddie," replied old Colin, gently, and his kind

eyes moistened as they looked at the innocent victim of an inevitable law, "the *warld's* unjust to sich, nae doot, but no the Lord. The sins o' men are *boun'* to bring forth evil fruit. What yan sows must e'en coom up. If tares coom up, it's *man's* fault for sowin' them—isna it?—and no God's. It's a law o' nature, and it canna be altered. But hearken to what the Scriptur' says: 'What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concernin' the land o' Israel, sayin', The faithers hae eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not hae occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. Behold, all souls are Mine; as the soul o' the faither, so, also, the soul o' the son is Mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.'"

Old Colin said all this very impressively, as though every word of it came straight from the heart, and were the result of firm conviction. The broad Lowland dialect which he had learnt to speak in his lifelong journeys backwards and forwards through southern Scotland, gave to the Bible words a sound as of personal appropriation, which made them more telling, so far as north-country Nick was concerned, than if they had been repeated in correct English.

The boy listened thoughtfully, but he said nothing. For Nick, though shrewd enough, as are most of those who live near the Borders, was not quick-witted, and it took a long time for a new thought to digest in his mind. That very evening,

however, his new master was able to drive the lesson home by means of a practical application.

On reaching the village-inn where a halt was to be made for the night, old Colin handed to his assistant his wages for the day.

"There, laddie," he said, as he pressed the promised shilling into Nick's unwilling hand, "a bit o' brass in the pooch mak's a mon feel mair responsible-like. There's, mebbe, a thing or twa ye'll be needin', and there's a shop roond the corner. I've an errand to do wi' a farmer body, no far frae here. I'll be gone an hoor, and yer time's yer ain till I come back."

He rode away on Shag, with Kelt following behind him, and Nick returned to his seat by the peat-fire in the inn-kitchen.

A man came in and called for whisky, which the old landlord brought him, together with a kettle of hot water, a tumbler, and a pipe.

The new-comer was a silent man, evidently much devoted to the business which had brought him to the inn.

He filled his glass with the air of one who does it daily, lit his pipe, leaned back in his chair, and proceeded to take his ease and enjoy himself, as though he had the place to himself. He sipped, shut his eyes, puffed lazily, and sipped again, with his feet outstretched to the red glow of the fire. His coat was shabby, his boats were patched, and his face was unhealthy in complexion. Yet, for the time, he looked happy.

If cares he had, and he looked like it, he was, evidently, on the way to forget them. The sight of his enjoyment, the smell of the steaming spirits, and the sense of his own fatigue and misery, worked upon the boy in the opposite corner.

The craving, which had been growing upon him since his introduction to whisky by Greyhound Geordie, awoke. He had a shilling in his pocket. Why should he not gratify his desire?

The old landlord, shuffling in, at that moment, with fresh peats for the fire, looked towards him inquiringly.

Nick threw him the shilling and called for spirits, and, very shortly after, he was as blissfully unconscious of everything else as was his opposite neighbour.

When old Colin returned, later than he had expected, Viper was alert enough, but her master's head rested on his arms upon the table beside an empty tumbler.

His more seasoned companion still sat opposite, his bleared eyes blinking in the smoke.

The old drover said nothing that night. Nick would not have understood him if he had done so, being, indeed, in a region to which human words cannot penetrate. But in the morning, when the reckoning was paid and the party were again on the march, he proceeded to point his moral.

Leaning over from his pony towards the lad, who, with an aching head and shamefaced looks,

was trudging beside him, he touched him on the shoulder and said—

"Sae ye mean to eat yer sour grapes, as yer faithers hae dune, and mak' the warld a bit harder for yer bairns than it's been for ye, eh, laddie?"

Nick said nothing. But he shook off the old man's hand.

"Canny there!" went on old Colin; "nae cantrips wi' me, lad! It's laid upo' me what to say, and I mean to say't too. Sae just cock yer lugs and listen, as Kelt, there, dis when I gie him his orders."

Still Nick said nothing.

A misty rain was driving across the moors, and the road was wet and muddy. The moisture settled on the boy's cap and shock of red hair, and trickled down his face and neck. He was feeling profoundly miserable and uncomfortable, both in mind and body. The shilling had gone from his pocket, and there was nothing to show for it but shamefacedness and an aching head. And now here was to be a lecture into the bargain!

There seemed no help for it, however, any more than for the falling rain. Both would alight on his devoted head whether he liked it or not. So he bowed to the inevitable.

Old Colin's eyes twinkled a little as he saw the stiffness in the lad's shoulders and the sullen set of his mouth. He read in them the state of his mind as plain as print.

"Ye're thinkin' I'm gangin' to haud ye a lang

discoorse, laddie?" he said, with a humorous twist of the lips. "Weel, and if I was minded that way ye couldna gainsay me, ony mair than gin ye were in the kirk and I were the minister. Ye're settin' under me, sae to speak, for Shag's ma poopit and weel above ye. But, nevertheless, ye're mista'en. I've given ye my text, it's true; but what I've still to say is mair of the nature of a confession. Ye think, mebbe, I'm i' quite anither boat than yersel', and am speakin' as the Pharisee to the Publican aboot things I've hed nae experience of? But there again ye're mista'en. They ca' me Cammel, it's true, and for the maitter o' that we're a' Cammels where I was born. But, for a' that, it wasna my faither's name. He was a ne'er-do-weel, was my faither, though I say it mysel', a Lowland drover wi' as bad a name as any i' the beesiness. And a bad time I had wi'm when I was a bit laddie. Swearin' and drinkin' and a' that's bad I larnt frae him afore my face had lost its smoothness. Then he—well he deed, and the less said aboot it the better. After that I got a godly man for a maister, and it was frae his mooth I larnt the bit textie I gav' ye. He larnt me hoo to fecht the deils that were in me, and fecht them I did, till—— Weel, they've ceased to rive me; and though, mebbe, I sudna say't, the name o' auld Colin Cammel's weel respectit frae the Hielan's to the Borders. And what I've dune ye can dae and a', laddie, gin ye'll ony try, thro' the grace o' One ye ken o'."

The old drover's voice trembled a little as he said

the last words. Sympathy, deep feeling, and earnestness were all in it, and the old face reflected what the mouth uttered.

Again he stooped from his saddle and laid a large rough hand, which, nevertheless, was very gentle, upon the shoulder of the waif who was walking by him; and this time Nick did not throw it off.

"Ye'll try, laddie, winna ye?" he said appealingly. "It'll no be easy, I ken that. Sich as ye and me has a harder time nor maist, and there's a wheen (some) things lawful for ithers that's inexpedient for us, and must be gi'en up—the whusky, for ane. It's no safe to use it when the longin's i' the blood. But it's better to cut off e'en the richt hand than to lose the soul, ye ken. Ye're no offended wi' me noo, laddie, eh?"

The last words fell with soft persuasive appeal on Nick's ears, and he struggled hard to answer them. But never in his life before had he been spoken to in such a fashion, and, somehow, it made his heart feel very large, almost as though it were spreading upward to his throat. And, try as he might, no words would come. But he put up both hands and grasped the big, gentle hand with a grip which brought the tears into old Colin's eyes. And that did quite as well.

The honest old drover and the homeless vagabond, against whom, till now, the hand of every man had been, took hands, as in a bargain, which was none the less binding that not a word was said.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DOGS OF JUSTICE.

THE Spring Assizes came on at Jedborough, and, as old Colin Campbell had foreseen, Nick was called as a witness.

Matt the Tinker, otherwise Matthew Elliott, had, also, been captured by the police, and both he and Greyhound Geordie, whose real name was George Grant, after examination before the magistrates, had been committed for trial.

Pete had managed to disappear; but Mrs. Matt, who had, also, been taken into custody on a charge of complicity, had, in her desire to clear herself, let out a good many more particulars than her husband at all approved of, and it was through her that Nick, and the outrage committed on him, became known to the authorities.

Up to the date of the trial our friend had continued with Colin Campbell the drover, and the two, in spite of the gulf of years which yawned between them, had become fast friends, as lads and old men occasionally do when there is sympathy between them to bridge the gulf.

That short sermon, preached from the pulpit of the pony's back on the way to Carlisle, was the last of the kind addressed by the old drover to his

protégé. No more words, indeed, seemed needed. Example, the most impressive of all sermons, was left to do the rest.

At Nick's special request, the daily shilling which old Colin insisted should be his, was kept by the master till the servant should have learnt to spend it better. For if money helps to make a man feel "responsible," as the old drover had said, Nick felt he would be better without any such responsibility just then.

"Ye're reet, laddie, ye're reet," Colin had said approvingly, when his pupil made the request. "Bairns must cut their wisdom-teeth afore they're trusted with property, and, seemingly," he added with a smile, "yours is still to cut."

It was on a bright spring day, when a keen east wind was ruffling the waters of the Tweed and blowing the big white clouds, like ships, across the pale blue sky, that Nick came back to Jedborough.

He had greatly dreaded the return. To stand in a court of justice and give evidence under the searching eye of the law is trying enough to any one inexperienced. But for a lad with a secret, which as yet he had not dared to share even with his fatherly old friend, it was nothing less than appalling.

He felt sure that, somehow or another, though the trial would turn on the crime of others, that night's work of his under the Roman Wall would come to light, and the prospect scared him.

If he could have run away he would willingly have done so. But old Colin Campbell's influence held him fast. He could not "run" with the old man's eyes upon him. So here he was at Jedborough, feeling like an ancient criminal with the red-hot ploughshares before him He must get through his ordeal as best he could, or betray himself by refusal.

Old Colin Campbell had insisted on accompanying him. Why the lad was so reluctant the drover could not guess; for, as he had said, he was an adept in reading character, and he failed to read in Nick's face the record written by crime.

So he set down the evident shrinking, in part to a boy's natural dislike to face a legal tribunal, in part to a commendable reluctance to speak against his companions.

Nor was this latter guess entirely without foundation.

In spite of his rough awakening on the subject of Greyhound Geordie, Nick could not quite convince himself that the old rascal's seeming kindness had all been part of the plot. In the end he had certainly intended to use the lad whom he had succoured, and, failing to do so, had abandoned him to a cruel fate. But the kindness had seemed too genuine at first to be a deliberate act of betrayal.

Had it been Pete against whom he was called on to bear witness, Nick felt that he would have done so without compunction, for he could not

forget how that young ruffian had gloated over his own and Viper's tortures. But with Greyhound Geordie it was different. And the prospect of seeing that slouching figure and foxy old face, with the keen and kindly eyes, standing before him at the bar, and being compelled to say that which would help to fasten his doom upon him, was by no means pleasant to Nick.

But this was part of the ordeal which must be faced, and from which there was no escaping. The dreaded moment came.

With a beating heart and legs which trembled under him, Nick was brought into court and put into the witness-box.

For the first few moments his terror was so great that his head swam and he could see nothing distinctly. A mist seemed to be over everything, through which all loomed dim and wavering before his eyes.

Presently, however, a voice brought him to his senses—a solemn voice administering to him the oath.

As he repeated it mechanically after the officer, he seemed to hear again old Colin's voice of warning in his ear, "Spak' the truth, my laddie, wi'out respect o' persons. It's the only way."

Then he looked up.

The mist had cleared away, and there, among the hundreds of curious faces which crowded the court, was the kindly countenance of old Colin himself, smiling encouragingly upon him.

The sight of the sympathy in that one face gave the lacking courage to poor Nick. He held up his head, clutched his hands together, and set his teeth to bear what might be coming.

He saw the judge, hedged about with all the solemn terrors which the law can give. He saw the keen, alert faces of the advocates and writers-to-the-signet. They looked to him like greyhounds held in by the leash, ready to spring out upon some frightened hare as soon as the word was given. And, though he was in the witness-box and not in the prisoner's dock, his heart went pit-a-pat, as if he were the hare himself.

A vision of the Laird o' Cockpen flashed through his mind at the thought of greyhounds, and then came the thought of Greyhound Geordie.

Nick knew that he must be standing at the bar together with Matt the Tinker, though, as yet, he had not been able to bring himself to glance that way.

All these thoughts and feelings look long upon the page, but the mind reads its own records much more quickly than eyes can do. And poor Nick's experiences, so far as we have told them, were crowded into a very short space of time. For, of course, you will understand for yourselves that that learned judge and his "dogs of justice" were not likely to await the convenience of their trembling witness, any more than, in the old free days, the prisoners at the bar and the Laird o' Cockpen

were wont to consider the feelings of the frightened hare. By this time, indeed, one of the greyhounds had been "slipped," and was already beginning to "worry" his victim.

"What is your name?" he asked sharply.

"Nick," came the low answer.

"What else? Give your surname."

A pause. Then with slow reluctance the witness answered—

"I's got nane."

The advocate raised his eyebrows.

"How old are you?"

"Aboot sixteen, or, mebbe, seventeen; I diven't joost reetly ken."

"And you come from the borders of Cumberland and Northumberland, I should guess by your accent, eh?"

"Ye're reet."

"I thought so. What is the name of your native place?"

There was a long pause. Nick looked this way and that, like an animal hard-pressed trying to escape.

But the greyhounds of the law are not wont to let their victims escape them, and the one in whose clutches poor Nick now found himself was not the least keen of his kind. He put his question in a different form.

"Perhaps you come from Haltwhistle?"

"Mebbe, I dae, if ye say sae," was the sullen answer.

The advocate smiled.

"I thought as much!" he said; "I know those parts. And now I will trouble you to look at the prisoners in the dock and tell me whether you have seen them before?"

Nick lifted his unwilling eyes. Like the poor hare in the clutches of its captor, he had no choice but to abandon himself. Yes, there was the sight he had dreaded to see. But it was far worse than he had expected.

Greyhound Geordie was not standing, but sitting at the bar. It was easy to see that he had been badly hurt, for his shoulder was bandaged and his arm in a sling. His once healthy, wrinkled face, browned by a life lived almost entirely out of doors, had turned to a ghastly grey. His figure had shrunk to half its former proportions.

The man had the pitiful look of one who is wasted with incurable sickness. His eyes, with their surrounding wrinkles, the handwriting of years of craft and cunning and sarcasm, and, also, of a kindly humour which looked strange amongst the rest, met the eyes of the lad. The two looked long at each other.

There was a sort of pathetic, half-yearning appeal in the old man's eyes which went straight to the boy's heart.

Once more he seemed to be sitting on the snow-covered moor on the northern side of the Roman Wall. That foxy face was bending over him with an odd expression of kindness in its wrinkled lines,

and a voice was saying, "I havena muckle wi' me —nobbut a bit bottle o' whusky and a crust o' bread—but ye're welcome to a share."

Nick hardly saw the sullen defiance in the face of Matt the Tinker, who stood beside his companion in crime. He had eyes for no one but Greyhound Geordie, and, after that one long look, he could face him no more.

It seemed to him as though he were being asked to hit a man who had been kind to him, when that man was himself in need.

Again he glanced hither and thither in the wild desire to escape. But there was no escape for him.

The advocate repeated his question, and, painfully unwilling though the witness evidently was, his testimony was dragged out of him.

Even the kindly encouragement which was still in the rugged face of the old drover could no longer comfort poor Nick. He felt as though he were guilty of ingratitude and treason of the deepest dye. He even forgot his own sufferings and those of Viper, as, once more, he met the pathetic reproach of those sunken eyes.

But he was soon to forget this, also, in a feeling much more personal. For, the first advocate having elicited all the information that he wanted concerning the burglary, the advocate on the other side arose, and began to cross-question the witness with a view to discrediting his testimony. And now began an ordeal for poor Nick, in comparison with

which the first was as nothing. The fresh greyhound tore the poor hare unmercifully to pieces. He was yet keener than his rival, and in a very few minutes he had routed out not only a good deal of the biography of poor Nick, but much of Tramping Sal's as well. He had found out about Nick's workhouse upbringing, and made him confess to dismissal from Bellister. He had unearthed the story of the hidden treasure, and was already in full cry on the scent of that buried assault by the Roman Wall, when a sudden interruption took place from the audience which packed the court.

"Ay, it's him!" cried a man's voice, in loud, angry tones. "It's him, sure enough. Yon's the rascal himself whae stole the gold and the dog, and nearlings knocked t' life oot o' ma son. If my lad dees, he'll have to hang."

"Silence in the court!" cried the officer. But he cried in vain.

The crowd, which till now had listened with quiet attention, rose to its feet, and for a few minutes the court was in a hubbub.

"Down wi' the villain!" they shouted. "Down wi' the young rascal who is lying awa' the character of a puir auld man. It's hissel' that's guilty!"

For a short time it almost appeared as though the lad in the witness-box would have been torn from it and lynched by the indignant mob before the very eyes of the judge and his officers.

But such a state of things could not long endure

in a nineteenth-century court of justice. Nick was hustled out of sight. The police appeared on the scene, cleared out the disturbers of the peace, and order was restored.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"WHEN ALL THE WORLD IS GREY."

"I COULDNA hae believed it o' yon lad!"

Old Colin Campbell stood on the stone bridge over the rapid Tweed, with his arms leaning upon the parapet and his eyes on the running water. His rough-hewn, kindly old face was full of trouble. The corners of the mouth drooped pathetically, and the lips trembled as, every now and then, they formed the words which are written above. They were spoken in a low voice, and were addressed to no one but himself. For he was quite alone. Not even his dog was with him, both Kelt and Viper having been left at the inn when their masters went into court.

The old drover had come out after the scene described in the last chapter. He no longer cared about the trial. He was only conscious of an aching feeling of bitter disappointment. For the lonely lad had stolen into the heart of the lonely old man. He had learnt, not only to believe in him, but to

love him. He had been full of hope for his future, and proud of the improvement which he thought had taken place since Nick had been under his care. The revelation, therefore, which had taken place that day had come upon him as a rude shock. It seemed to him that he had been cruelly taken in; that the lad he had befriended had been playing a part with him, pretending to give him his confidence, and keeping back what, had he known it, would have prevented all dealings between them.

In the first bitterness of his disappointment old Colin even forgot from what a terrible situation he had rescued this lad, and was ready to believe with the crowd that Greyhound Geordie, instead of being the chief actor in a dastardly outrage, was the innocent victim of a youthful criminal. Such black ingratitude towards the old men who had been deceived into showing kindness to a precocious young rascal by means of a pitiful tale, seemed, indeed, appalling, and old Colin, though he was too sick at heart to join in it, could not find fault with the angry menace of the crowd.

As he stood there looking moodily at the water, there was no doubt in the old man's mind concerning the guilt of the lad. He had watched Nick closely during the trial, had noticed the hesitation with which he had given his evidence, and the hunted look in his face when, under cross-examination, he had been forced to reveal his antecedents. Above all, he had seen the scared look in the boy's

eyes when the accusing voice had been raised against him. He had expected an indignant denial; but, instead of that, the tell-tale crimson had rushed to his face, and he had hung his head and allowed the storm to go over him in silence.

Such behaviour, it must be confessed, did not look like innocence. To feel that we have been deceived by, and disappointed in, some one to whom we have taken a fancy, and towards whom we are conscious of having gone out of our way to show kindness, is not conducive to an impartial judgment. We must not, therefore, blame old Colin for so hastily condemning poor Nick.

Here was the bad name come up again against this unlucky dog. Was it, this time, to end in hanging?

"I couldna hae believed it," repeated the old man. "And, yet, if what yon mon said was true, a mair hypocritical young tyke couldna be found i' the hale kingdom. Eh, dear sirs, but it's gaen me a stoond! I had a feelin' maist byordinar (extraordinary) for yon lad. Weel, weel, I've had mony a disappointment in my life and I maun joost tak' anither. It's frae the Lord's han', I ken that, but I canna feel, the day, as if that made it ony better to bide. It's sinfu' to say sae, I ken fine, but sae it is. Eh, lad, lad! What for did ye deceive me that gait? I'm no sae yable to thole trooble as ance I was. Could ye no leave me my lane? Eh, dear, dear, dear!"

In the soft spring twilight the old drover bowed

his head upon the parapet and a few slow tears dropped down into the flowing Tweed. For poor Colin Campbell was old. He had never known the joy and comfort of such ties as come with wife or children, and he had, all unwittingly, given to this lad all the long pent-up affection of a big, warm heart. Never in his solitary life had he felt more lonely than on that spring evening when he stood on the Tweed bridge and saw his life flow on before him, lonely to the end.

In vain the brown water laughed and chattered and raced in the broad channel below him. In vain the sunset painted the sky with the loveliest tints of violet, rose, and crocus, which shone reflected in the river, like another sunset down below. In vain the coming spring told its soft tale of hope in swelling bud and freshening field. Though always before this kindly old philosopher had been able to read the lesson of Nature even when much less plainly writ, he failed to see it now. His old heart seemed to have lost its spring at last, and his old eyes saw all the smiling world in black and brown and grey.

Even the jolly blackbird, whistling its blithe, sweet prophecies of joy and gladness yet to come in that thorn-bush by the river's brink, had no message for the dull old ears.

"Hope on! hope on! hope on!" it seemed to say. "Another day, old man, another day."

But to our old friend Colin Campbell it seemed that neither hope nor the future was now for him.

He had staked the last hope for his nearly run-out life on one poor human heart. That heart had proved a blank, and now he had lost his all.

Ay, it is easy to preach hope to others, but how hard it is to apply the lesson to one's self when the mists of disappointment are down on the mountains of our life, and sun and stars have wholly disappeared! How doubly hard for the old, whose sun has nearly set! Poor, poor old Colin Campbell!

But while he leaned thus on the bridge with the light dying around him, a hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Maister Cammel, ye're wanted," said a voice.

The old drover looked up, and turned a dazed, tear-wet face on the speaker. If this were a messenger of hope he wore rather a queer livery—a dark-blue uniform, a broad leather belt, and a helmet on his head. He was a policeman, in fact. But what of that? Hope sends queer messengers, sometimes; for she disdains not to use any.

"Eh, what? Surely, ye're no gangin' to tak' my chracter next, maister? It's a' that's left me!" answered the old drover with a pathetic attempt at a smile. "What for d'ye want me?"

"Nay, nay, Colin, it's no that," replied the policeman, reassuringly. "It's yon lad o' yours. He's wantin' sair to see ye. It seems there's a warrant oot again' him for robbery and assault t'other side o' the Border. It's at the instance o' a chap called Ridley—the same wha made the disturbance in the coort to-day. They're takin' the lad to Haltwhistle,

the nicht, to be examined by the magistrates o' his ain district, on charges of robbery and assault brought against him by his late master, and he wants to see ye afore he gangs."

"Nay, maister," answered the old drover, shaking his head with mingled anger and sadness, "I've had eneuch o' that lad."

"Nay, but, Colin, ye canna refuse to see him when he begs sae sair? Man, ye're no sae simple as to gang wi' the tide o' public opeenion and believe, as folks did, this afterneen, that yon grey-heeded rascal has been wrongfully accused? Nay, nay, Pritchard's lass is main certain as to his *back*, though she disna ken his face. And how came that ball in his shoulder if it didna come frae her gun? Depend upon it, this lad will turn oot mair sinned against than sinnin', though, mebbe, it's no for me to say sae afore he's tried. Ye'll come alang wi' me?"

The old drover hesitated a moment, then he said slowly, "Ay, I'll gang."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HEART *VERSUS* WILL.

THE policeman opened the door of a little waiting-room in the court-house, and introduced Campbell into the presence of poor Nick.

The lad was sitting by a little table, with his head down on his hands.

A policeman, who had him in charge, was sitting by a small fire.

When the old drover came in he rose.

"He's asked to see you alone," he said, in the slow, correct English which those speak to whom a dialect comes more natural, and who have carefully studied what they consider a more "genteel" tongue. "The train starts in half an hour; you may have a quarter." Saying this, he withdrew.

The old drover stood in the middle of the floor, looking sadly down on his late *protégé*.

The droop of the young figure showed the deepest dejection. The shock of red hair and the hands hid the whole of the face.

For full two minutes out of the precious fifteen, neither of them stirred nor spoke. A clock over the chimney-piece ticked off the minutes with relentless regularity.

Still Colin Campbell stood and looked down upon the bent red head. His heart yearned over the lad. But his sense of justice was stern, and it tyrannized over his heart.

Presently, however, he took a step nearer to the table. It seemed as though his heart were drawing him in spite of his head. The clock had now ticked off three minutes from the allotted fifteen, and only twelve remained.

Still the boy did not look up, but the shock of

red hair began to quiver. The old man saw it, and a tear gathered in his grey eye and trickled slowly down his furrowed cheek.

"Mair sinned against than sinnin'." The policeman's words returned to his mind, and, with the magnetism working upon him which comes from the near presence of one beloved, his heart rose up and began to wrestle with his will. He came so near to the table that, by stretching out his hand to the full extent of his arm, he might have touched the red shock head had he so desired. But his hands were clenched behind him, fettered by the sternness of his will.

Five minutes were now gone from the fifteen, and not a word had passed. As the clock hands pointed to the ended five minutes, the lad's shoulders began to heave, and presently a strangled sob sounded through the quiet room.

Old Colin could bear the strain no longer. That sob went deeply into his heart, so that, like a horse which feels the spur, it broke away into a gallop, and the will could no longer hold it in with either bit or bridle.

He went close up to the lad, laid his large right hand on the tumbled red hair, and another tear trickled down and fell upon the boy's hands.

"My lad, my lad," he said in a voice which shook pathetically. "My puir, puir bairn!"

At the gentle touch and the pitying words, Nick raised his head, saw that the old man had kneeled down beside him, and with a cry like that of Esau

at the sight of what he had lost, bowed his forehead upon Colin's shoulder and wept sore.

Inexorable time went on.

Ten minutes passed, and yet the lad had said no word of explanation.

There came a knock at the door.

"Five meenits mair, Maister Cammel," said a voice, "and then ye maun come awa'."

Old Colin felt the boy tremble in his arms, for, by this time, he had wrapped both of them around him.

"My lad," he said, still in that same oddly soft voice, "ye sent for me?"

At the gentle reminder Nick raised his head, cleared his throat with an effort, and answered—

"Ay, maister, I wanted to—to——" The lump came back, and he had to stop and swallow it. "I wanted to let ye ken hoo sair I rue that I didna tell ye arl. At first I was flayed o' losin' yer good opinion, and—maister, I've niver had a rale good freend like ye afore! Folks has tret me like—like a *dog*, ever sin' I can mind. Nay, I wadna tret a tyke as I've been tret, not——"

A passionate sob rose in his throat and checked the words.

"Bairn, bairn, dinna I ken what it is?" said the old man, patting the heaving young shoulders with a soothing touch. "Ye needna tell me. But, laddie, time's nearly up. Let the sins o' ithers bide, and keep to yer ain. Is it truth, then, what's laid to yer charge? Was it a' lees ye telt me?"

There was pathetic appeal far more than reproach in the shaking voice. But Nick was stung to the quick. He drew himself back from the clasp of the old man's arms, and broke out reproachfully, in his turn—

"Lees? And wad I lee to *you*, maister? D'ye ken me sae little after the days and weeks we've travelled togither, that ye can think *that* on me? As true as I'm a sinful lad I've telt ye nobbut the truth. I only wish I'd telt ye mair on't!"

"Then ye're fausly accused? Thank God, laddie! Thank God!"

The light of a great relief broke over the old man's face, which doubt had so sadly clouded, as, sometimes, on the evening of a misty day the long white shrouds of vapour twist themselves together along the valley streams and leave the hilltops clear to the sunshine.

But Nick could not clear himself altogether.

"I niver said it was *arl* false," he said slowly. "It's true I didna tak' the goold, nor did I steal the dog—she cam' after me of her ain free will. But if Teddy Ridley dees, it'll be *my* hand that did it. Nay, maister," he added hastily, as he saw the cloud returning to old Colin's face, "I niver meant him ill, but when I saw mysel' hounded awa' for takin' what he took hissel'—to the best o' my belief, that is—the deil cam' into me, I think, and I didna ken *what* I did, nor care sae muckle owther!"

There was an odd sort of defiance in the way in

which the lad tossed his shock of red hair as he said these words. Then in another tone he added quickly, "Ye believe what I say, maister?"

"Ay, laddie, and that I dae," was the hearty answer.

"And ye forgie me?"

"I'd hae but little chance mesel' if I didna, laddie. May the guid Lord help ye through!"

The last words came, after a little pause, with trembling fervour, and again old Colin drew the lad into his sheltering arms.

A sharp rap sounded on the door.

"Time's up!" said a peremptory voice.

"I'll say a' I can in yer favour, laddie," said the old drover, as he rose stiffly to his feet and turned towards the entering policeman.

"Ay, I'm ready, sir," he said, as the man held the door for him to pass out.

But Nick held him by the sleeve. He seemed still to have something he wanted to say, but the words did not easily come.

"Come, lad," said the policeman, with decision. "We've got to march."

"Viper!" gasped the boy. "I want to see her afore I gan."

"I'll see to the tyke; niver fret aboot her, laddie," said old Colin, as the policemen took their prisoner between them to conduct him to the train.

"But she'll niver sattle if I diven't tell her to bide," objected the lad, plaintively. "Can't I see her, sir?"—he turned to the more kindly looking of

his two conductors—"nobbut yan minute?" The boy's eyes pleaded as well as his lips.

The man seemed touched. For policemen have hearts as well as other men, though those stiff blue coats are a wonderful protection, as a general rule. But, nevertheless, he shook his head.

"It canna be, lad," he said, not unkindly. "It's no possible, ye ken. And besides—— Sergeant Kennedy," he went on, turning to his companion, "what did I hear aboot yon dorg?"

"Her owner's taken her," answered the superior officer shortly, in his school English, as, with a frown of reproof to his subordinate, he marched his prisoner away.

Old Colin Campbell watched them go down the street to the station; but his face was no longer that of a man who has lost his all.

"Pier laddie!" he sighed, and his old eyes were wistful and tender as they rested on the strong young figure between the two tall policemen—"pier laddie! It's vara hard on him—vara hard! And yet—eh, Colin, my mon!" he continued, apostrophizing himself, as he went on his way to the inn. "Eh, Colin, my mon, but ye're sair like Peter, ye're vara short o' faith! Ye'll hae to clap down on yer knees, this nicht, and thank the Lord for a' His mercies, ye wull that!"

He crossed the bridge over the Tweed in the soft spring gloaming. The light was almost all gone now—all but one lingering yellow gleam remained to show where the sun had been.

The trees by the river were wrapped in shadow, but the cheerful blackbird whistled on.

"Hope! hope! hope!" it said, "another day will dawn, another day!"

And, this time, old Colin's ears were no longer deaf.

"Thank God!" he murmured, for his heart was overflowing, though he was not yet upon his knees. "He's a deal better to us 'or we desarve—a vast better! I'll, mebbe, be spared to see my laddie ance mair afore I dee."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WORLD AGAINST HIM.

"AND are ye quite determined to proceed against yon puir lad, Mr. Ridley?"

The speaker was old Colin Campbell, who had followed his *protégé* to Haltwhistle, where Nick was now detained at the police-station, awaiting the Petty Sessions, which were to be held next day.

John Ridley, as we have seen, had, after much searching, hunted down his quarry at last. For Nick had not only, as he supposed, committed a robbery on his premises and an assault upon his son, but he had defied his master to his face—almost a worse crime than either of the others in

the eyes of the farmer of Bellister. It was to Ridley's exertions, more even than to those of the police, that Nick's apprehension was owing. He had taken a warrant out against his late servant on both charges, and so determined was he to bring him to justice, that, dissatisfied with what he considered the slow proceedings of the police, he had constituted himself a special detective in the case. Reading in the papers the account of the burglary near Jedborough, and of the outrage, by the tinkers supposed to have been concerned in it, on a tramp-boy, his suspicions that the latter might possibly be Nick were immediately aroused. For he remembered that, according to Nick's own story, he had been in company with people of that class when first he had run away from Bellister; and what more likely than that, on his present flight, he had joined with such again.

"Birds of a feather flock together," said Ridley to himself, "and what fitter company than tramps and thieves could there be for a young rascal of that sort? Well, I always meant to look up William Scott, the horse-dealer chap at Jedborough, and see if he hasn't got a cart-mare to suit me—for Polly's getting a bit auld for ma work. I'll kill twae birds wi' yan steane, and attend the trial. Mebbe, I'll get some information, even if this tramp-lad should turn out not to be Nick."

Accordingly, John Ridley had crossed the Border, ostensibly to buy a mare, for he preferred

to say nothing about his other errand, lest it should prove to be but a wild-goose chase after all.

What he heard in Jedborough, however, made him very sanguine that Nick and the tramp were one and the same. And when he learnt that the lad in question had red hair, and that he would appear in the witness-box against the prisoners for burglary, his excitement was such that it required all his iron self-control to keep his suspicions to himself.

He spoke of them to no one, however, but the counsel for the defence, with whom he had an interview, supplying him with a good deal of information concerning the past history of the lad whom he felt next to certain the witness was, and suggesting a searching cross-examination.

But though Ridley prided himself upon being able to keep cool on any emergency, his passions were not by any means so well-bridled as he imagined them to be.

The sight of Nick sent the angry blood to his head, and it was all that he could do to sit quiet while the witness gave his evidence against the prisoners. When, however, the counsel for the defence got up, and, in pursuance of his own suggestions, proceeded to cross-examine the witness, Ridley could no longer contain his excitement. The Roman Wall was no sooner mentioned, than, quite carried away by his feelings, and unable to await the end, the farmer sprang to his feet, and took the matter out of the lawyer's hands by hurling his accusation at Nick's head.

It was not very likely, therefore, that, having run down and captured his prey, as he considered, quite through his own astuteness, he would now forego the gratification of his vengeance at the request of Nick's new master.

He had hardly the patience to listen to Colin while he put the question with which this chapter begins.

Growing very red about the face and neck, he rose to his feet and pointed to the door of the room in which the interview had taken place.

"Am I determined to proceed again' yon lad? 'Deed and I am that, mister. I dinna ken whae ye may be, but it speaks badly for ye to be friends wi' sich scum o' the earth as the young rascal ye're trying to beg off. I wish ye good mornin', mister."

The old drover turned away without a word, and left the farmer to himself. He was, at the same time, too sad and too proud to notice the insult to himself. His thoughts were all with "his lad," as, in his heart, he called poor Nick.

He knew what he would himself feel if shut up in prison; and, to his kindly heart, the idea of his late companion, shut up in a close cell, awaiting he knew not what, was nearly as painful as though he had been there himself. The confinement was bad enough, but far worse might be in store.

Old Colin felt his flesh creep as he called to mind the account Ridley had given of his son Teddy.

The lad's condition was grave. It was more

than improbable that he could be carried into court to give his evidence, next day; and the doctors were doubtful as to whether he would ever rally from the injuries he had received.

"If my lad dees, he'll have to hang for it," Ridley had said, using the same words that he had uttered at Jedborough.

And old Colin knew, that, in the event of the assault being proved against Nick, this would, probably, be the end of it. "Puir lad, puir, puir fellow!"

Old Colin repeated the phrase at intervals, under his breath, as he walked back to Haltwhistle, and his heart was heavy within him.

He had put his *protégé's* case into the hands of a solicitor, so that nothing might be neglected which could lead to a satisfactory conclusion. But Colin had little faith in lawyers.

"I like nane o' they finnickin' writers," he muttered, as after an interview with the solicitor, he turned his steps towards the police-station to see Nick. "They're a' the same wi' their 'aforesaids,' their 'thereinafters,' and a' the tag-rag o' words they use to wrap up a simple beesiness. But, like a' the fashes o' this warld, they're necessary evils, I suppose, and we maun e'en pit up wi' them till we gang aloft. We'll be shot o' them then. For there'll be nae law up there, I jaloose (suspect), and, consequently, nae lawyers."

Having arrived at this rather uncomfortable conclusion for the lawyers, old Colin lifted his head with a little air of defiance, and walked more rapidly

on his way. The cause of this gesture was the impudent remark of a little boy to his fellows as the drover went by.

"Yon's the chap that's the friend o' the young deevil," he said, pointing with his finger to Colin.

"What d'ye mean?" asked his companions.

"Why, the chap they're tryin' for the murder o' a decent man's son—Nick they ca' him. Diven't ye ken whae auld Nick is? Ay, I thowt sae! Well, this is the young un!"

The boys laughed. But old Colin only quickened his walk a little, and held his head the higher.

"Sin' a' the warld's again' the puir laddie," he thought, "the mair reason I sud stand up for him. And I wul!"

The old drover had an order to visit the prisoner, and he was admitted without difficulty.

Nick looked very white and weary, and there was a hunted look in his eyes which went to his friend's heart. But he tried to smile as he saw the painful emotion of the old man.

"Niver fret, maister," he said, with a vain attempt at cheerfulness; "I niver had much hope frae the first, for I nivef had nae luck in my life. If yan's born to hang, yan'll be hanged. Sae what's t' use o' frettin'?"

"My laddie, my laddie, ye maunna say that," cried old Colin in great distress, so that his voice shook. "Yer life's in the Lord's hands; ye ken that not e'en a sparrow fa's wi'oot Him? And, laddie, the Lord is good. I hae proved it."

"Then ye dinnot believe in luck, maister?" Nick's wistful grey eyes looked into the troubled face of his friend. "Ye dinnot haud wi' them that think there's onything in the star ye're born under?"

"The stars? Havers!" replied old Colin, with the irritability of one who is in grief of mind. "What's the stars got to dae wi' our lives? I sud like to hear wha was the fule-body that telt ye sich a story as yon! Why, lad"—the querulous note went out of his voice—"it's naethin' but faithlessness to say sich things. Didna God mak' the stars, also? and isna He their Ruler as weel as oors?"

"Mebbe ye're reet, maister. I ken little aboot sich things. I've larned nae religion sin' I was a bit bairn at the schule."

"Nor I havena learnt mickle owther," was the answer. "I niver hed mich chance o' book-larnin', and I dinna ken whether a' my opeenions wad joost come up to the measure o' the Kirk, for I've hed to wark them oot by mysel' for the maist part. But, laddie, the heart has mair to say in them things than the heed—no that I'm sayin' onything again' guid larnin'. But if we've given the heart to Him, and hae dune oor best, He'll no be that ill content. Pit yersel' in His hands, bairn, and dinna fash yersel' aboot sich heathen things as stars. He'll dae His best for ye, ye may depend o' that."

"Time's up, sir."

Colin Campbell's eyes rested silently upon Nick's. Heart seemed speaking to heart, though both the

old heart and the young were too full to put those sayings into words.

"God keep ye, my bairn!" said the old man; and then the door shut behind him, and Nick was left alone.

But he no longer felt alone. All his young life he had had to stand by himself and fight for his own hand, as the expression is. But now, even though it seemed as though the world was more than ever arrayed against him, he felt, for the first time, that there was a friend by his side who was fighting for him.

The care and affection shown him by old Colin could not have been greater had they been shown between father and son, and the assurance that some one cared for and believed in him brought a feeling of warmth and strength to the poor lad's heart.

It did more. It made the fact of a Father in heaven a reality to him.

Sitting alone in his cell he went over and over again in his mind the words that old Colin had spoken, till, at last, when darkness came, for the first time since he was a little lad, Nick fell on his knees and prayed.

The scared look passed out of his eyes. Peace settled, like a dove, upon his heart, and the prisoner, spite of the uncertainties of the morrow, slept as soundly, that night, as any free man could have done, without a care to trouble him.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BITER BIT.

THERE was a great stir in Haltwhistle, next day. The local interest shown in a case is all the stronger when those concerned in it live in the near neighbourhood, and when the scenes of the crimes to be inquired into, are so well known to every inhabitant as were Bellister and the Roman Wall.

Nick and Teddy had been at school with most of the lads, and that the one should have nearly been "the death" of the other, when they had lived so long under one roof, created a feeling of delightful horror in the minds of all their contemporaries. It was a sensational bit out of a newspaper, enacted in their very midst, which, in the eyes of many of its inhabitants, raised the quiet little town of Haltwhistle to a position of public interest and notoriety which was extremely flattering.

"The Haltwhistle Murder Case"—how thrilling that would sound! This, we are sorry to say, was the thought in too many minds; and, though nobody liked to confess it, there was a lurking hope that events might so turn out as to result in this crowning distinction. For, even in the nineteenth century, enough of savagery remains

among us to cause the appetite for horrors to be stronger than that sense of pity and fellow-feeling which Christians ought to cherish for their sinning, as well as for their suffering brethren.

The very youth of the prisoner was looked on, by most of those who flocked to their doors to see him go by, as an added ingredient in the interest. His smooth face and boyish looks, it is true, awoke pity in a few hearts; but with the majority, they weighed in the scale against him.

"Nobbut a bairn," was the common remark, "and yet as bad as the auldest sinner! It's joost horrifying, isn't it?" And heads were shaken, and frowns levelled at poor Nick, so that he felt himself condemned already.

John Ridley and his wife were the first witnesses to be examined, and they gave their evidence ruthlessly. They had not a word to say for the orphan who had grown up in their house, and everything that they could say against him they said.

They spoke of the boy's ingratitude in running away the first time from the people who had befriended him; of the ill-treatment of their son by the defendant, even in those early days, which had led to his leaving Bellister.

"The very fact of his return," said John Ridley, "showed that he kent how guid a heame we had gi'en him." And then he went on to show how lenient he and his wife had been in receiving the orphan back, and laid great stress on the base

return for their kindness made by Nick in robbing their premises, and attacking their son. Nick's lawyer here remarked that it was by no means proved that his client *had* taken the gold, and that, even supposing this to be the case, it was not his employers whom he had robbed, valuables, found as the coins had been, being "Treasure Trove" which is claimed by the Crown. Ridley seemed a little taken aback by this information, which cleared up the question, raised in the byre by Nick and Meggie, on the day of the finding of the coins, as to whose property they really were. But the farmer had not done yet, and he went on to relate how Nick, on being accused of the theft, had again run away from the place without even waiting to be dismissed.

"Whae's owe t' gold is hardlys sae much the question, as *I* see it," said Ridley, with a cutting glance at Nick's lawyer. "It's whae bagged it we want to ken. And if I'd been let to speak wi'out having t' words ta'en oot o' ma mooth, I'd ha' telt what, to *ma* mind, gans far to show. Why, that lad hadn't a word to say for hissel' when I pit it to 'm! And if to bolt while my back was turned isn't to fit on t' cap, I'll joost trouble the wise folks who have studied the law to show me what *is!*"

There was a laugh at this, and Nick felt the blood rush to his face as he realized that, by his precipitate flight, he had, indeed, given the Ridleys a handle against him.

Yes, it would have been wiser to have stayed

and braved it out—he saw that every one was thinking so. But then, not one of them knew how his employers had goaded him to it by their determined belief in his guilt.

Meggie Ridley was now summoned to give her evidence, and Nick felt a feeble hope, as he heard her name, that here, at last, was some one who would be ready to say what she could in his favour. Even though she had helped him so little when first he was accused, he could not believe, knowing how kind she had always been, that this companion of his childhood would fail him now, when he needed a friend so much. But bitter disappointment was in store.

The pretty, fair-haired child, with her blue eyes and apple-blossom complexion, created quite a stir as she entered the witness-box. It was easy to see how frightened and ill-at-ease she was. There were marks of tears on her cheeks, and she kept her eyes cast down and her hands locked together, while her lips trembled and her breath came fast. When she appeared, the prisoner turned his eyes towards her with a look of eager questioning. They seemed to be appealing to her to stand his friend in this his hour of trial, as he and she had always been friends before.

"Meggie," they seemed to say, "*You* won't be against me, will you?"

But the girl's eyes gave him no answer. They did not even glance his way. Not even by a gesture did she show that she was aware of his

presence. The frank, roguish Meggie of other days seemed to have utterely disappeared.

Her answers came low and trembling, and, alas! they did him more harm than good. It seemed to poor Nick as though his old playfellow, instead of standing up for him, was doing her best to ruin him; and the iron entered into his soul, as each low, hesitating reply seemed to rivet more firmly upon him the crimes of which he was accused.

When, at last, her testimony was given, and Nick again looked towards her with reproach and entreaty, she still refused to look at him.

It seemed as though she were determined not to acknowledge him in any way.

"She's shamed o' me, that's it," thought poor Nick. "She winnot let wit (show) that she ever cared a pin for sich as me."

The thought filled him with bitterness. It was that, far more than the actual harm her testimony had done to his cause, which went to the boy's heart, and brought with it a reckless carelessness of results.

"If Meggie's turned again' me, I dinna care what happens to me!" he thought to himself; and he set his face with a look of sullen unconcern, which convinced the onlookers that he was not only guilty, but hardened in crime.

There was a pause when Meggie had given her evidence. She was crying by the time it was over, and many people, who showed no pity for poor Nick, felt sorry for her.

There was a little stir and whispering in the court. Then the doctor, who was attending Teddy, came in and reported that he had just been to Bellister with a carriage, intending to bring his patient into court, had it been possible to do so; but that he had found the condition of the lad so critical as to make his appearance out of the question.

"It is as much as his life is worth," said the doctor, gravely. "It *may* be that, in a week, we may patch him up sufficiently to warrant it. But I doubt it. I am sorry to say that it is as likely as not that the injuries will ultimately prove fatal."

Again there was a stir in the court, and glances of horror and anger were directed towards the prisoner.

It seemed more than likely that this dour-faced young fellow would be sent to the assizes on a charge of "Wilful Murder," or, at least, of "Manslaughter." The case bid fair to be sensational in the highest degree.

After that little stir, every one grew very silent. They were listening intently for what would come next.

But nothing came to satisfy the craving for more.

The story, which had grown so interesting, was suddenly broken off; for, in the critical condition of the principal witness, it was impossible to proceed. The case was remanded for a week, and Nick was taken back to the police-station.

As he left the court, in charge of two policemen

old Colin was waiting at the door on the chance of a word or look. But the policemen hurried their prisoner on, evidently anxious to avoid the crowd which had assembled to see him; and it was noticed that the boy kept his eyes on the ground, and refused to lift them, though he seemed aware of his old friend's neighbourhood.

Old Colin went back to his lodging with an aching heart. But it was more for his lad than for himself that he was distressed. He had doubted him once, but not anything that he had heard that day, much as the evidence had told against Nick in the opinion of the public, could shake his faith in the prisoner's innocence.

That week was a weary time both for Nick and his old friend. It was passed by the boy in a sort of hopeless apathy. He told himself, that, spite of anything old Colin might urge to the contrary, he was "born to be hanged, and hanged he would be." He did not even seem interested in the old drover's reports of Teddy; and Colin might have been the dearest friend of the latter, so assiduous was he in his inquiries. Not even the sick lad's own father and mother could pray more earnestly for his recovery than did this old man, who had not so much as seen him. Considering the sort of people the Ridleys were, this is, perhaps, not saying very much. But let that pass. The spiritual condition of John and his wife in no wise detracted from the goodness of Colin's prayers.

And every prayer was needed. For, if Teddy

died, the Haltwhistle magistrates would have no choice but to send Nick to the assizes with a terrible charge against him. For Teddy, before his case became so serious, had made his deposition, and there seemed no doubt whatever who it was that had assaulted him.

Nick, indeed, did not deny this charge, vehemently as he had repudiated that of the robbery.

Would Teddy be able to appear? This was the question which was absorbing every one's attention for miles around. It was this that was asked when gossip met gossip, the state of the weather, usually so interesting on these occasions, especially in the variable climate of the hill-country, being, for the time, quite neglected.

It was not—"Will it rain, think ye?" even with the farmers, but—"What's been heard o' Ted Ridley?"

The doctor was tired of being questioned on the subject, and avoided anxious inquirers whenever he could, by galloping past on his stout grey horse. But his face was watched as he went by, and the answer gleaned from his looks which could not be gained from his tongue.

"T' doctor luiks terrible grave," was the usual comment at the beginning of the week. "Yon lad maun be gannin' doon."

But, as the days went on, and the guardian of the public health began to assume a satisfied aspect, the opinion gained ground that Teddy would recover.

"He wadna seem sae smiling-like if his patient was deein', wadn't t' doctor," sagacious folks remarked, and they were right in their conjecture.

Though still in a serious condition, and never likely to be the lad he had been, the principal witness in the case which was exciting such interest, was "patched up" sufficiently to appear. No wonder Dr. Shield looked complacent. It was a decided feather in his cap, more especially as his fellow practitioner, Dr. Billow, had said, all along, that the case was hopeless.

Thus it came to pass, that, when the magistrates met again, the two lads, who had last confronted each other with all the heat of anger and hatred in the dark solitude of the moors by the Roman Wall, were again brought face to face to answer in cold blood before a court of justice for the deeds that had been done there.

Though it was evident now that neither murder nor manslaughter could be brought against the prisoner, the charges of theft and of assault remained, and though the case was less sensational, the interest of the public had hardly abated.

Everybody was eager to see one who had been brought so near to death's door as Teddy had been, by the hand of a school-companion, and to hear what he had to say against that other lad who had so nearly proved his slayer.

Even the whisper that another important examination would take place that morning, did not cause the interest in the Bellister case to flag.

What this new case was, was known for certain to very few. But it was reported that the police had just captured a man who had been concerned in the Jedborough burglary, and that he it was whose examination was to come on after the magistrates had finished with Nick.

No one had been able to catch a glimpse of either of the prisoners, that morning; the police had been careful about that. But nearly every one in Haltwhistle was on the look-out for Teddy's arrival, and the carriage which brought him, with the doctor in close attendance, was loudly cheered as it drove up.

It was evident to see that public feeling was entirely with the Ridleys, and that no one had the smallest sympathy with the friendless lad who had been their drudge.

Those who were fortunate enough to gain admittance to the room where the magistrates were sitting, looked curiously at the prisoner, as Teddy Ridley, with his head bandaged and his face white and sunken, was carried in and placed in an arm-chair, instead of the usual witness-box.

Nick gave a slight start, as his eyes rested on the pitiful wreck, whose face he had last seen, white and senseless, upon the dark heather. How often had that face appeared to him in dreams! No wonder he could not see it again unmoved.

But that little start was all that was to be seen of the inward emotion. The moment after, his eyes were on the ground, as before, and nothing

but sullen unconcern was to be read upon his face. Teddy gave his testimony, also, without looking at Nick. It was given in a low and feeble voice, and sounded much like an oft-conned lesson repeated against the grain by some fretful schoolboy. His story was short, and varied hardly at all from his previous deposition. He had been returning late from an errand, he said, on which his father had sent him ; and, to save time, had cut across the moor instead of going round by the road.

As he was passing the Roman Wall, Nick had sprung out from its shadow, set the dog upon him, and attacked him himself, at the same time, utterly without provocation.

Taken off his guard, he had been quickly thrown to the ground, and half-throttled by his assailant.

"For pity's sake!" he had gasped, "dinna murder me right off! What have I done to——"

"What have ye done?" was the angry answer, and then had come the accusation of stealing the coins, which, said Teddy, he had taken himself.

A desperate struggle followed, Teddy getting the better for a moment. Then he was pulled down once more, and, after that, he remembered nothing.

"And how do you know," he was asked here, "that the lad Nick was the thief? Till he accused you of taking the coins, you had not so much as heard that they had been found."

Teddy did not answer at once. He looked faint, and seemed to find it difficult to collect his thoughts.

The doctor gave him a restorative, and then the question was put again.

"I kent nought about it *then*," he said. "That's true enough, for it didn't come out till after I had gone on my errand. But I remembered afterwards, when I came to mysel', arl aboot Tramping Sal. Money had passed between them afore. I seed it mysel' afore Christmas, when faither gave him a two-shilling bit. She wanted more, and he wanted it badly to make her bide away. She's his mother, ye ken, though he isn't willin' to own her."

There was a titter in the court at this, and the prisoner was seen to turn fiery red.

But Nick's lawyer objected that Teddy's so-called knowledge was purely supposition. He had cause to know that Nick had knocked him down, certainly. He had had "striking proof" of that, as the play has it.

There was a laugh at this, and the laugh, for once, was against Teddy.

But, continued the lawyer, there was no such proof that the same person had taken the coins. His client, in owning to the assault, had pleaded provocation, and had given them a stronger proof that some one else had taken the coins than Teddy could find to bring against him. The box which had contained them was seen by his client in Teddy's possession, and this it was which had led to the attack. He would like to ask how young Ridley got that box, and whether the coins, also, had been in it when it came into his hands?

These questions on the part of Nick's lawyer created quite a sensation.

The prisoner raised his head for the first time since he had come into court, and looked at Teddy, who again showed signs of faintness.

There were low exclamations of "No! No!" and "Shame!"

But these were hushed down.

The magistrates allowed that the questions were quite in order; and Teddy, forced to reply, hesitated, contradicted himself, and, finally, fell back on a flat denial.

A policeman came forward at this juncture, and informed the chairman that the other prisoner who had been taken, that morning, and was awaiting his turn for examination at the back of the court, was willing to give evidence, bearing on the present case, in the hope that, in return, he might be leniently dealt with in his turn.

A fresh sensation ensued. The plot was thickening. The chairman, after consulting his fellows, gave leave, and the new witness was introduced.

He was a slouching, gipsy-looking lad, with dark complexion and furtive eyes. The prisoner seemed to recognize him at once, for he started violently.

"What is your name?" was the first question put.

"Peter Elliott," was the reply. "Ay, I ken the prisoner, and he's reason to ken me. There's nae love lost betwixt us, as he can tell you. It's not to save *him* but to searve mysel' that I'm willing to tell you what I know anent this robbery."

And then he proceeded to tell how Teddy and Greyhound Geordie had had sporting transactions together. How the former was in debt to the latter to a considerable extent for "sporting tips," as the phrase is, and bets lost which he could not pay. How, at last, Greyhound Geordie had threatened to tell the lad's father, if the money was not found without further delay.

"And found it was," concluded the young tinker, with a mocking glance at Teddy, "found, as you may say, in raythe a peculiar fashion, and handed over and all. That chap there, thought, I'll bet, that he and the auld 'un were the only folks that kent. He isn't aware that I, being curious as to our gaffer's movements—he was a sly auld chap, was Greyhound Geordie, and tried to keep us in the dark; but he couldn't keep things from *me!*—followed him on the day in question, as was in hiding at that wayside pub near the Roman Wall where the meetin' was to take place, and I saw the money pass. 'Hullo, my bantam!' says Geordie. 'These is angels, not sovereigns. Wherever did ye get them?'

"'What odds is that to ye, since ye've got them now?' answered Mr. Ted. 'Here, take them away, and change them across the Border; it's all I ask of ye?'

"He didn't want questions asked, ye see, having reason enough for that, as we ken now. And Geordie took them wi'out another word, for reasons of his own. He kent, mebbe, that angels is worth

mair nor sovereigns. They're bound to be, or he wadn't ha' ta'en them—trust auld Geordie for that. So now, ye ken what I do, anent this beesiness. I've found the thief for ye, I think, and I only ask, gentlemen, in return for my help that ye'll give me my liberty."

He had found the thief, indeed; and the thief was not at the bar, but was lying back, in a real faint, this time, on the armchair which served as a witness-box.

When both witnesses had been removed, Nick was declared to be cleared of the charge of robbery, a nominal fine was inflicted for the assault, as committed under great provocation, and, to his intense relief and astonishment, the prisoner found himself free to go where he would, while his accuser was charged with taking the coins, and only admitted to bail in consideration of his pitiable condition.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE END OF GREYHOUND GEORDIE.

THE very first to come forward and take Nick by the hand, as he left the court, was old Colin Campbell, who had paid the fine for his *protégé*. The tears were in the old man's eyes, tears of intense joy. He could hardly speak, but he gripped Nick's

right hand with his own, while with the left, he slapped him on the shoulder.

"Didn't I say sae, my lad?" he exclaimed at last. "Didn't I tell ye it would a' come richt? Thank God, lad, thank God, I say, Who has done justice, for His mairey endureth for ever!"

And then he fell to shaking the hand he held till Nick thought it would come off.

The lad tried to speak in return, to thank this true friend for all that he had done for him. But the words would not come. He was still struggling for them, when a letter was handed to him.

It was from George Grant, *alias* "Greyhound Geordie," and had come under cover from the governor of Jedborough gaol to the chairman of the bench at Haltwhistle.

Geordie, apparently, was not aware that Nick had been in custody, for the letter only contained a few words of entreaty that he would come to Jedborough and see him once more, as he was very ill, and had something important to say to him.

Freed himself, Nick could feel nothing but intense pity for the prisoner, feeling as he did, that his evidence had helped to convict him. He even reproached himself, as he handed the letter to Colin, for his old companion's present condition.

"There's nae cause for ye to blame yersel', whativer, laddie," said the old drover, as the two settled themselves into opposite corners of a third-class carriage, and sped away on their journey north.

"I canna hear ye reproach yersel' as though ye were at fau't. What cud ye do but gie yer evidence at his trial accordin' to the truth? He was guilty, and ye cudna mak' him itherwise, even if yer evidence had been all that was wantin' to bring his sin hame to him. He'd, likely, hae been condemned wi'oot ye. Ye forget that the lassie's ball was found in his shoulder. *That* was strong evidence besides yours. Ye maun learn to balance thae things better i' yer mind, Nick, my lad, if ye want to live at peace wi' yersel' and a' mankind." Then, after a little pause, during which he looked attentively at Nick, he added, changing his tone from admonition to one of fatherly tenderness, "But there, laddie, ye're no fit to be fashed wi' an auld man's clavers. Ye're joost ootdone, pier bairn, and guid for nought but rest. Here, sit by me and pit yer heed on my shoulder whiles I lap ye in my plaid. Hoots, lad, what is there to be shamed o'? There's naebody here to see."

So Nick, with but a very slight demur, did as he was told, and, soon, he was fast asleep, with his red head on Colin's shoulder and the old man's arm, as well as his plaid, wrapped closely around his body.

Never in his life had poor Nick been so tenderly cared for, not even when he was a little child. And he found himself wishing, as he fell asleep, that this tender-hearted old man were the father whom he had never known. Then, indeed, might he have at least one parent of whom he could be proud, and whom he could love with all the hitherto

unasked-for affection which was stored up in his lonely young heart.

But, after all, were Colin, indeed, his father, could he have loved him more? Hardly. For though one proverb says that "Blood is thicker than water," Shakespeare's saying, that one may be "more than kin and less than kind," contains a truth just as deep on the other side of the question. And there is a kinship of the heart which is even nearer than the ties of blood.

It was with an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness that Nick presented himself, next morning, at the gaol; for he and his friend had arrived in Jedborough the night before, too late to obtain admission. He would fain have taken Colin with him; but this was not allowed.

"Auld Greyhound Geordie, as they ca' him, is vara bad," said the warder to Nick, as he took him along the bare stone passages to the room where the sick man lay. "Ye maun be canny wi'm, my lad, for there's no mitch life left in him. He's fretted a deal to see ye, and he fretted that sair for a sicht o' that greyhound o' his that the beast's been let in beside him, the day, for a bit. It's hard to refuse the deein', ye see, even when they're cheat-the-wuddy chaps (gallows-birds) like yon. Oor governer's a kind mon, ye see, and he's stretchit a point. It's mair than cud hae been expectit."

He opened a door of one of the infirmary cells, a comfortable enough room, and well-warmed. Here, stretched on a bed, with the Laird o'

Cockpen lying on the floor beside him, Nick saw the man he had come to visit.

But how changed! He had looked ill, indeed, at the trial. But the gunshot wound, received at the burglary from the hand of Dr. Pritchard's gallant "servant-lass," had been sapping his strength ever since, and had made him what he now was.

Nick started, as he met the hollow, fever-bright eyes looking eagerly towards the door, from out of the haggard face propped against the pillows. The long thin nose looked longer and thinner than ever. In fact the face looked all eyes and nose, for the cheeks and mouth were so sunken as to have nearly disappeared altogether. The russet tinge which had lingered in the hair and raggy beard had faded a good deal. The beard, indeed, had been shaved off, and the hair cropped, and all that remained of it had turned nearly white. But the crafty, satirical lines which had given so much of its foxy character to Greyhound Geordie's face, were still there. For handwriting of this sort can never be blotted out when a man arrives at Geordie's age, even though the craft and satire may cease to be exercised.

He stretched out a thin hand, from whose bones all the flesh had gone, to Nick as he came in. The Laird o' Cockpen, too, condescended to recognize him as an acquaintance by a slight wave of the tail and a lifting of the fine, straight nose, though he evidently did not consider him worth the trouble of rising in his honour.

"Ye've dune weel to come, lad," said Geordie, as Nick took his offered hand and sat down on the chair which had been placed for him near the bed.

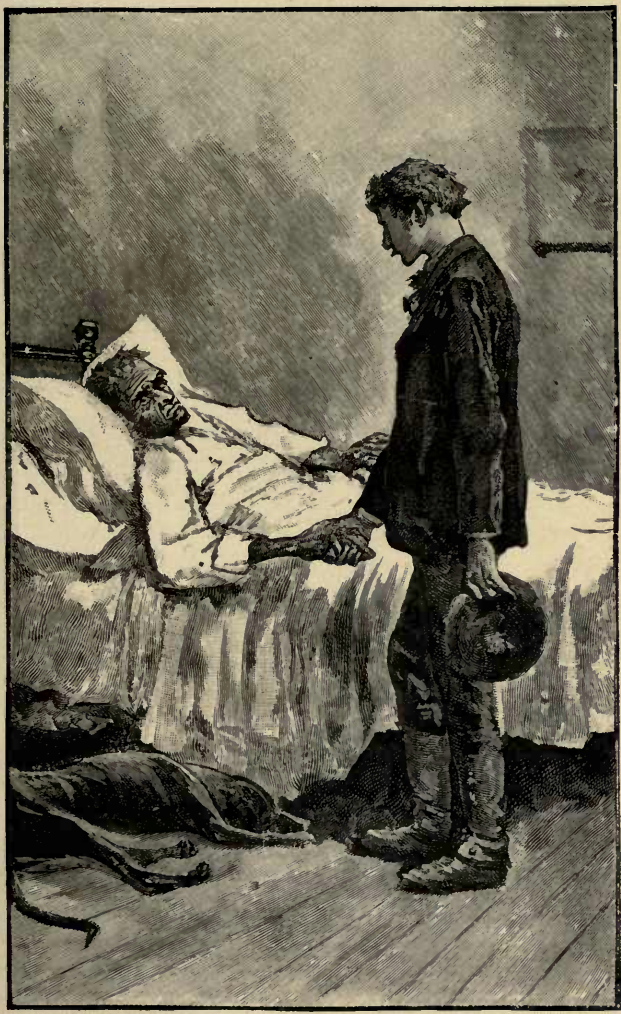
"I'd ha' dune mair for ye nor that if I could," replied Nick, in a voice which trembled a good deal; and he looked down at the Laird to avoid encountering the penetrating eyes of the sick man. "Maister," he went on, the words of a little speech, which he had been rehearsing by the way, tumbling out thick and fast, "I was sorry to speak again' ye, as I had to do t'other day."

"Nay, laddie, nay," said Geordie; and he laid one of those skeleton-like hands of his on Nick's knee. "I bear ye nae grudge for that. Ye believe me, laddie?"

"Ay."

Nick could say no more, for there was that in the sick man's voice and manner which brought a lump into his throat and the tears inconveniently near to his eyes.

"And I want ye to ken, and arl, that it wasn't by *my* will that ye and yer tyke were treated as ye were yon day in the plantin'. I was forced to tie ye up for fear ye sud' gie the alarm. But I telt them to pit ye in the van. I niver meant them to tret ye as was dune. And to hang that wise-like dorg o' yours, and that afore yer eyes! Man, I was mad when I heard of it. What ye maun hae thowt o' me! Can ye forgie me for arl that? I'm a deein' mon, ye see, laddie, sae ye maun joost think on o' that."



"YE'VE DUNE WEEL TO COME, LAD," SAID GEORDIE.

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The keen, bright eyes looked across at Nick with a wistfulness in them which was a stranger there.

Nick took the thin hand into both of his, and a sob came as he tried to speak.

"Dinna talk o' forgiveness," he faltered. "Ye've been vara kind to me."

"*Kind?* Weel, I hardly think that, lad. Folks wadn't ca' it joost 'kind' to 'tice a yoong chap like ye to put his hand to the kind o' kittle (risky) job we were aboot yon neet. It isn't joost a palace I'm in noo, my lad, nor yet a bed o' roses I'm lyin' on. And ye micht ha' been here yersel' if ye'd dune as I wanted you to dae. *Kind*, sez ta? A queer sort o' kindness, I think!"

There was a touch of the old sarcasm in Geordie's voice as he said this, and he laughed an odd, cackling sort of laugh. He looked at Nick as though he expected an answer. But the lad did not speak. Geordie's tone made him uncomfortable, and he was at a loss how to take him.

"Weel," said the sick man at last, "ye're o' t' same mind as me, noo, eh? Yon was joost t' sort o' *kindness* a faither wad be likely to dae his son, eh?"

Again he fixed his glittering eyes on Nick with such an odd expression in them that the lad grew more and more uncomfortable. What could the old chap be driving at, he wondered? Were his wits failing him again?

It almost sounded like it, and Nick felt the blood

tingle at his finger-ends from sheer nervousness. He stooped down and began to stroke the satin coat of the Laird o' Cockpen, to the manifest annoyance of the latter, who resented it as a decided liberty.

But still those hollow, fever-bright eyes remained fixed upon the lad. There was a wistful look in them, as though they were pleading for a different answer than that which the sarcastic tongue suggested.

"Weel?" asked Greyhound Geordie again. "Cannot ye spak', lad? Ye telt me, yance, ye didna ken whae was the daddy o' ye. Ye'd be blithe to hae yan the marrow (just like) o' auld Greyhound Geordie, eh?"

Still no answer.

Was the old fellow laughing at him, or did he really know something concerning his parentage? Nick wondered this in his heart, and it sent the hot blood rushing to his face. But he had not the courage to put the question.

Then the sick man grew impatient. A trembling ran through all his wasted body as he asked querulously—

"Ye'll hae left the tongue o' ye at Haltwhistle, it seems. Eh, lad?"

Nick looked up in desparation.

"What div ye want me to say?" he asked, with a sharpness in his voice which he did not intend.

The sick man began to whimper in that distressful way which persons in extreme bodily weakness sometimes show when thwarted.

"Lad," he cried—"lad, canna ye see what I'm wantin'? I've lived a life wi'oot love, and noo I'm dyin' alone in prison. I like ye, lad. I've liked ye ever sin' I found ye starvin' by t' roadside, little as I may ha' shown't. It was the drawin' o' natur', I reckon, for they say that blud is thicker nor water. Weel, I diven't ken whether it's sae wi' ivery yan; mebbe, it isn't wi' ye? No? But, oh! lad, if ye *cud* show a small kindness to pier auld Geordie, he'd die happier, he wad that!"

He stretched out both wasted hands imploringly towards Nick, like a beggar asking for alms.

The lad was touched to the quick, uncomfortable though this interview was making him. He got up and went closer to the bed, taking the chill, bony hands between his own warm, strong ones.

"I'll dae onything for ye I can. Didn't I say sae?"

"Onything?" asked Geordie, wistfully. His eyes looked up into those of the lad who was bending over him, and he trembled and breathed hard. "Onything, laddie? Could ye—d'ye think ye could? It'll seem a hard thing to ask, mebbe, after neglectin' ye arl these years, but if ye could nobbut kiss me and carl me '*faither*'!"

The sunken eyes were full of an earnest appeal which was terrible to see.

But Nick did not see it. The prison-room seemed to be spinning round with him, and there were red flashes before his eyes.

He dropped the hands of the sick man, and slid

down on to his knees beside the bed, covering his face with his hands. He simply could not stand upright under the blow which he had received.

His father! *What* a father! Could it, indeed, be true? Or was it but a cruel jest on the part of this strange old man?

Greyhound Geordie groaned.

"Ye canna bring yersel' to't?" he said piteously. "It's a deal to ask, I ken that, for the mak' o' faither I've been. But, oh! lad, it wad ease me sair, and I winna be here to fash ye lang! Ye canna dae't? Weel, weel!"

He sighed, a long, weary, sad sigh, and sank back on the pillows from which he had raised himself.

The greyhound got up slowly, went close up to the pillows, and thrust his long, straight nose into the hand that was nearest to him. He seemed to understand that his master needed comfort.

Greyhound Geordie stroked the smooth head of his favourite.

"Weel, Laird," he said plaintively, "you and me maun e'en dae as we can. There's naebody else to care for us. Eh? Pier beast! Pier beast! *Ye* loove the auld fellow, onyhoo. What's to come on ye when I'm gane, eh, Cockpen?"

The greyhound licked the thin hand, and his dark eyes looked lovingly into those of his master.

Nick looked up. He was suffering horribly, but nevertheless he recognized that another was

suffering still more. And, besides, there was a question which must be asked.

"Is it true?" he said, in a choked voice. "If it is, then——" He stopped.

"True? Ay, sae far as I ken, it's true eneugh," answered the sick man, with some bitterness. "I didn't ken, mysel', till yer story came out in evidence at my trial; and it knocked me down, it did that, when I called to mind how I had tret you, and how 'twas my own son was standin' there again' me. But it's true eneugh, sae far as I ken. If ye're Sal's son, it's maist likely that ye're mine an' arl. She and me took yan anither for better or for warse some auchteen years agone. It was for *warse*, ye see." He smiled, the old sarcastic smile. "She was a born tramp, was Sal, and nowther she nor me could dae wi' each other, naeway, though she was a fine-like wumman in them days, she was that! Weel, weel, that's arl over now. We pairted afore we'd been wed a year, and I've never set eyes on her since. Mebbe, I was to blame. If ye ever see her again ye maun let her ken I bear nae malice, and I hope she's nae ill-will to me. There was a lad-bairn, I kent that, though I niver let on, not wantin' to be fashed wi' sich-like, and the wife gone. Ye favour Sal a bit, laddie, I think—as she was when I kent her, onyhoo," he added quickly, as he saw the boy shudder. "And, mebbe, me and arl. Ye've reed hair, and baith Sal and me was carroty. Ay, ay, it's likely eneugh!"

Again he sighed, and looked wistfully at Nick.

A strong shrinking was upon the lad. To acknowledge this condemned robber as a father went against him body and soul. He could not feel that he owed this man any of the love and reverence which are a father's due. And yet—yes, with all this, Nick was conscious of something within him which told him that he was, indeed, the son of this poor old reprobate. And the loneliness and scorn and want of love which had been his own portion in life spoke to his heart, and pleaded in favour of this dying thief.

A tear gathered in his eyes and fell upon the thin hand which rested upon the bed close beside him. Responsive tears started to Geordie's eyes and trickled down his wasted face.

"Niver heed, lad," he said brokenly. "I ken weel I desarve nowther love nor peety. I've made my ain bed, and maun e'en lie on't. The chaplain says that there's mercy and love for me ayont the grave, and if that's sae, it's a deal mair nor what sich as I could expect. Auld Greyhound Geordie maun dee as lonely as he's chosen to live. Livin' alane has been easy eneugh, but, somehoo, the dyin's anither matter; and I wad ha' liked—— But there, it was overmuch to ask!"

He sighed, lay back, and closed his eyes. It looked, indeed, to the lad who was watching him, as though the lonely end was very near. A great pity sprang up in his heart. He knew so well himself what it was to be lonely and unloved.

He stooped lower.

If what the old man asked for would make him die the happier, ought he not to give it? After all, it was but a little thing. But little things, sometimes, loom very large. And this thing seemed tremendous to poor Nick.

"Ye'll shake hands wi' me, and wish me weel through, onyhoo, laddie?" asked Geordie, opening those sad, tired eyes of his; and he held out his hand.

Nick took it—he did more, he stooped still lower and laid his lips on the dying brow.

"Good-bye, faither," he said.

Greyhound Geordie had conquered. His face lighted. With more strength than he had seemed to possess, he drew the lad's head down close to his own and kissed him on the mouth, laying one wasted hand upon the red head.

"Thank ye, laddie," he whispered—"thank ye. Ye've done me mair good nor ye can tell. The blessin' o' a faither like me canna be o' muckle vally, I doot, but, such as it is, ye have it. Ay, may God bless the laddie, and give him a better end nor his faither!"

There was silence for a while. Then a knock sounded on the door.

The dying man loosed the boy and pointed to the greyhound.

"Tak' him, laddie," he said, in a husky whisper. "He's arl I have to leave ye, barrin' the inheritance o' a marred life and a dishonoured name."

He paused and caressed the dog, who had come up to the bed again and was licking his hand.

"Gang wi'm, Laird," he said; "yon's yer maister noo."

The greyhound turned its dark eyes wistfully from one to the other.

"Tak' him awa'! Tak' him awa'!" said the dying prisoner, querulously. "He's a grand beast, is the Laird," he added, with a fond glance at the beautiful creature, "and ye're welcome to him, but"—his lips trembled as he met the loving look of his dog—"I can bide nae mair!" He lay back again and closed his eyes.

Then the warder came in, and Nick and the dog went away with him. And that, so far as Nick knew it, was the end of Greyhound Geordie. For he died shortly after, and Nick never saw him again.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MORE THAN FATHER.

FOUR years went by, four happier years for poor Nick than he had ever passed in his life; for when he had told old Colin Campbell how that he had found and lost a father, the honest old drover had adopted him as a son.

"Never heed, laddie," the good old man had said, putting his hand on Nick's shoulder, as he stood shamefaced before him. "Ye mind what I said to ye, ance, about the sour grapes? If yon auld chap

—may God forgie him!—has set his teeth on edge by eatin' o' the fruits of evil-doin', that's nae reason that *you* should let him spoil yer life for you. Ye ken the auld saw, 'A stout heart to a stey brae'? Weel then, clim' yer bank. Haud up yer heid, mon, and mak' a brave fend. Live doon what's ahint, and mak' folks forget ye're no the son o' honest folk. If auld Colin's help can do ye ony guid, he'll be a faither to ye from this day for'ard, sae lang as he lives!"

So the old drover had said, and he had been as good as his word. Nor had his kindness been thrown away, for Nick had met it with such love and gratitude as had made him like a son indeed to the childless man.

"Yon lad's like a staff to me i' my auld age," Colin often said during those three years. "I'd have had to give up the drovin' and retire lang since if it hadna been for him, and God kens I'd hae been puir—no joost sae puir i' brass, mebbe, but puir, indeed, i' loove, but for my laddie."

While Colin could still manage to ride auld Shag, the old man and the young had journeyed together to and fro between the Highlands and the Border towns, with their sturdy little moss-troopers in front of them. Nick had thus learnt all the secrets of the cattle trade, and when at length the weight of years prevented the old drover from travelling any longer, Nick was able to undertake the business for him.

But he never failed, after each trip, to visit the little Highland croft which old Colin had bought with his savings, to see how his adopted father was faring, and to report his own doings.

Those visits were red-letter days both for the old man and the young; for no father and son could love each other with a truer affection than did those two waifs of society.

Nor was it only cattle-dealing that Nick learned from the old drover. By practice still more than by precept, he learnt the lesson which old Colin had had to learn, before him, that however heavily handicapped a man may be in the race of life, he is yet no sport of fortune, but a free agent, able to run with patience the race that is set before him, ay, and reach the goal before many who have the start of him.

And as old Colin had made good his own footing in the face of many difficulties, so did his adopted son follow in his footsteps, till the name of Nicholas Grant (for our friend had taken the name to which, as it seemed likely, he had a right) bade fair to be as well respected as that of Colin Campbell. All this time Nick saw nothing of the Ridleys of Bellister, though he thought of them, and especially of Meggie, far oftener than even Colin knew.

He heard that the charge against Teddy had been dropped, the young man having sunk into such a pitiable state of chronic invalidism and semi-imbecility, as to render his trial impossible. He learnt, also, that John Ridley was becoming more

and more disliked by the pitmen of the colliery where he was viewer. But that was all.

"When I'm gone, mebbe ye'll be ganging back to yer native place, laddie?" Colin asked him one day. "It micht be as weel if ye cud mak' it up wi' thae Ridleys. Ye're no carin', noo, mebbe, but when ye reach the spot in the journey where I stand, ye'll like to ken that ye're at peace wi' a' men. Nay, laddie," he went on, as he saw a dark look come into the lad's face, "ye maunna bear malice. They've wranged ye, I ken that, but is yer ain conscience quite clear towards them? Gin ye'd keepit yer temper yon nicht, that puir lad ye telt me of micht hae been as hale and strang as ye are this day. Ay, ay, I ken he was at fault, I ken a' aboot it; but a mon who loses haud o' hissel' sae far as to assault his neebor canna be held blameless. Think on what I say, laddie, and when occasion offers see that ye act as a Christian should."

Though Nick passed this little admonition by with some impatience at the time, it was not forgotten by him any more than other things which his old friend let fall, and a time came when he acted on it.

For such words are like little seeds. They often fall unheeded on the hearts of those that hear them, to spring up in due season, long, perhaps, after the sower has passed away.

Thus it was with this word of old Colin's. A day came when Nick, returning home from one of his expeditions, found his old friend lying dead, struck

down by a sudden stroke during his absence. He was only in time to stand with Kelt, as joint chief mourner, beside the old drover's grave, and sorrow, as he had never sorrowed before, over the loss of his more than father.

Lonely, indeed, did Nick feel as he returned to the empty cot, which with the bit of land and all old Colin's worldly goods he had left by will to his "dear adopted son," and sat, on the evening of the funeral day, by the desolate fireside between the two faithful dogs which had been bequeathed to him by the two old men who had called him son.

Long into the night he sat thinking deeply over all that old Colin had said, reviewing his past life and speculating concerning the future.

Sadly lonely this seemed after those years of close companionship with the old man, whose arm-chair stood empty by the fireside which his presence had made so homelike.

Nick felt, as he looked at it, that this could no longer be home for him, though the place was his by right, unless he could find some one to bear him company. He looked at his two dumb friends, the only ones which were left him in the world, and sighed heavily as he stroked the rough head and the smooth.

Once upon a time the companionship of a dog had contented him, but old Colin's society had spoiled him for that. He loved the dogs as much as ever; but, after all, though dogs can do many things, there are some matters which are beyond

even their wise heads and loving hearts. They cannot exchange thoughts with us. They cannot, with all their power of sympathy, plumb the depths of human joy and grief.

Much as Nick liked his present companions, he was conscious of a want, a want which even little Viper had been far better able to fill. Poor little Viper! Did ever heart beat in any canine breast which was so nearly human as was hers? So Nick wondered as he sat lonely by the fire. And, with the thought of Viper, there came a thought of Viper's mistress, little Meggie Ridley of Bellister.

He thought of her as the blithe, kindly little companion of his boyhood, not as the frightened, tearful lassie whose testimony at the trial had been so damaging, and who would not so much as meet his eye when he stood in the prisoner's dock. He had been sorely hurt at the time by what he had looked on as her unfriendly behaviour to him when all the world was against him. But, now he came to consider it, was she so much to blame? Like himself at the trial of Greyhound Geordie, she had been forced to speak the truth; and can a man blame a girl like that if she shrinks from claiming acquaintance with one who is accused of crime? No; after all, her conduct had been but natural.

How would she meet him now, wondered Nick, if he were to go back to her as a free man with a house and croft of his own, and a character for industry and honest dealing? Would she give him

her friendship once more, in spite of what he had done to her brother? She must be quite a big girl now, must Meggie Ridley. Should he find her as bonnie and friendly, now she was a lassie of eighteen, as she had been as a child?

All these speculations passed through Nick's mind as he sat by his lonely fireside; and with them came a great yearning after the old home of his boyhood and the only human creature remaining in the world whom he felt he could call "friend." And then he thought of old Colin's counsel that he should return and make his peace with those people who had sheltered his boyhood, even though not too kindly; and the idea, which had gone so sorely against the grain at the time, found lodgment in his mind.

Yes, he would go. As soon as the business connected with old Colin Campbell's death was settled, he would return to his native place before undertaking any more work. He would at least make inquiries as to the family at Bellister, and ascertain how any advance on his part was likely to be received, and then he would act accordingly.

Having come to this determination, Nick felt his loneliness a little less crushing; for it seemed to him that the empty chair was no longer so empty, and that from its depths he could hear his old friend's voice saying to him, as he had so often done before, "That's reet, my laddie, I'm pleased wi' ye. Dae yer duty, and the Lord'll bless ye, and mak' it to prosper in yer hand."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"YES OR NO?"

IT was on a dark November evening that Nick returned to Bellister.

He got out at Greenhead, the station before Haltwhistle, intending to make some inquiries at the colliery, and then walk the short distance between that and Haltwhistle.

Not having been in the neighbourhood for more than four years he did not think there was much chance of his being recognized. He had gone away a smooth-faced boy; he was returning a young man, with a promising little moustache and a very fair show of whisker.

The pock-marks, too, which had once so much distressed Meggie, had almost disappeared, and the shock red head, though as red as ever, was now well-kempt and clipped into decent bounds.

He had grown considerably, and his clothes were good. Altogether he was no longer the miserable, ill-fed, ragged boy who had tramped into Haltwhistle, on that misty night in November, over four years ago, but as respectable-looking a young fellow as could anywhere be seen, with an air about him as of one who has done well for himself and is held in esteem by his fellow-men.

With all this, however, Nick preferred arriving

at a station where he had no acquaintances, and making those few inquiries that he might find how he was now looked upon at Bellister before showing himself in a place where he and his mother were so well known as they were in Haltwhistle.

It was nearly dark when the train drew up at Greenhead.

Blenkinsop old castle, on the top of the hill, showed a black mass of wall and turret against a grey, starless sky, the rows of coke-ovens and pitmen's houses at the foot giving out a red glow and cheery twinkle, in pleasant contrast to the darkness above.

In the daytime the contrast is just the other way, and the grimy-looking colliery-village at the foot of the slope throws into picturesque relief the ivy-grown walls against the blue sky overhead.

Our friend Nick had not been much at the colliery. But he knew the place enough to find his way without any difficulty to the little public-house, where the pitmen, who had been at work during the day, were wont to congregate in the evening. As we know, Nick was now a perfectly sober fellow, having, by old Colin Campbell's advice, given up spirits altogether, though he had never taken the pledge.

But, this evening, for reasons of his own, he broke through his usual rule of never calling for drink in a public-house, and, sitting down with the men who were drinking and smoking round the fire, he ordered a glass of beer.

The pitmen looked at him as he sat down, and the very animated discussion which was going on among them sank for a while into silence. They saw he was a stranger, and the strangeness tied their tongues.

It was a comfortable room, with a sanded floor and a bright fire, heaped, as fires in winter generally are where coals are plentiful, well up the chimney, and giving out a pleasant warmth on the circle of men around it.

Nick's hands were cold, and he spread them out to the blaze. The nature of his employment was not such as to harden and blacken the hands, and his were noticeable in a company of men accustomed from infancy to work amongst coal.

He felt that his hands as well as every other detail of his dress and person were undergoing the critical stare of a dozen pairs of eyes, and the sensation was not over-pleasant.

To make a little diversion he ventured on the first remark.

"Trade pretty brisk at present?" he asked.

An elderly man opposite to him took his pipe out of his mouth, knocked the ashes in a leisurely fashion into the fire, and then said—

"That depends on what ye carl brisk. We, mebbe, mightn't agree aboot that. What we carl brisk here might be reckoned slaw across t' Border, and t'other way on. Ye'll be a stranger, hereaways, likely?"

There was an amount of caution about the

answer, and an adroitness in turning it into a question which was characteristic.

Nick began to regret an inquiry for an answer to which he cared nothing. But he was north-country bred as well as his interlocutor, and knew how to answer in the same strain.

"As ye say, I've nobbut joost come ower t' Border. But I ken my way aboot a deal o' places—cattle-jobbers dis, ye see."

Nick's reply got him well out of the corner into which the pitman had tried to pin him, and that without any unnecessary expenditure in lies, which, indeed, our friend would have scorned to tell.

"Ay, it's a mair lively-like trade nor coal-hackin', I reckon," remarked a younger pitman, who was a bit sprucer and cleaner than the rest, though, indeed, none of the men could have been called *dirty*, all surface grime having been carefully removed on coming out of the pit. "Yan disn't see a deal o' the warld when yan's wark lies in its inside. I'm aboot tired on the job, I am."

"What for disn't tha' turn jobber thysel', Bob, if them's thy sentiments?" said a companion, with a laugh.

"Yan maun stick to yan's trade if yan wants to gan for'ard," answered the young man, sagely.

"Hear! hear!" cried his fellows; and there was a general laugh.

"But ye'll not stick *here* lang, I'm thinkin'," said another among the younger men. "Ye'll be

gettin' t' sack next, Bob, like Jem and Watty did to-day. Eh, Watty, lad, hoo d'ye feel? Ye'll hae to tramp roond and see a bit on t' warld afore ye sattle doon at anither pit boddum. As for Jem, we ken *his* sentiments. He gav' us them afore ye cam' in."

"Watty and I agree," said a dour-looking fellow, who had not spoken since Nick's arrival.

"Ay, we dae that," answered the more lively Watty. "We've nowther on us any notion o' exchangin' Blenkinsop for ony ither pit. It's anither nor *us*'ll hae to flit, I'm thinkin'."

"Ay, it's aboot time he did," answered Jem; and Nick noticed a dangerous flash in his sullen eye, which boded ill for somebody unnamed.

"'Least said, sunest mended,' lads. That's what *I* think," said the old man who had first spoken; and he glanced across at Nick.

"Who's yer viewer here?" asked the latter, trying to speak unconcernedly; and he took a sip of his beer.

"He's ain brither tiv auld Nick, if ye ken what *that* means, stranger," answered Watty; and there was a general laugh.

Nick started at hearing his own name, and looked interrogation, wondering if the speaker had recognized him. But there was nothing in the circle of faces around the fire to alarm him on this head.

"Ay, ye *maun* be a stranger here if ye diven't ken hoo highly we think o' oor viewer," remarked Bob. "He's greatly respected, is John Ridley."

"He always *was* open-fisted and sweet-tempered," put in another man; "but sin' he was sold by his ain son, he's been joost angelic, hasn't he, lads? I wadn't be in Teddy's shoon for arl the gold they said he fund—and him tied to the fireside and forced to hear onything his faither chooses to tell him. Eh, man, but yon lad'll hae felt the rough o' auld Ridley's tongue!"

"Sarves him reet for daein' what he did. I arlways said yon lad wad come to grief," remarked one of the elder pitmen. "It's aboot maddened auld Ridley, and he sae prood-like and arl."

"Ay, it was rough on yon pier lad as was sarvant at Bellister," said Bob. "What's come on him, I wonder."

"Naebody, hereaway, kens that," answered Watty. "He was badly tret, was yon lad, by arl the Ridley family. And folks says for arl he was fund innocent, his name's niver named i' Bellister. It's like a reed clout to a bull, it mak's the auld man fair wild."

"Ay, that's true," answered Bob, "for I tried it on mysel', yan day, when he was misca'ing me; and man, didn't he glower!"

"Lads," said the old man in the corner, "the whusky's makin' ye arl over-free wi' yer tongues, I'm thinkin'. Ye forget we've a stranger amang us. He'll not be carin' to hear sae mooch aboot oor viewer. Is there ony news where ye come frae, mister?" He turned to Nick with meaning, and both Nick and the pitmen took the hint. The

former produced a Jedborough paper, and the subject was changed.

One after another the younger men present rose from the seats and went quietly out, till, presently, Nick found himself alone with a few of the elders. Then he, too, got up from his seat and handed the paper from which he had been reading to the man in the opposite chimney-corner to whom he had first spoken.

"I maun be off," he said. "Ye may keep t' paper."

"And thank ye. Good neet," was the civil reply.

Nick went out.

It was quite dark now; but he knew the road he had to travel, and had no fear of losing his way.

The path he intended to take would lead him past Bellister Castle, and, though the night was cloudy, he had some hopes that, when the moon rose, which it would do shortly, there might be light sufficient to see the old home of his boyhood which had never been very long out of his mind.

To go boldly up to the door in the daytime and pay his respects to the family, as he had hoped to do, seemed hardly possible after what he had heard in the public-house. But, at all events, Nick thought he might stand outside in the moonlight, if the moon condescended to shine, and look once more on the broken walls he so well remembered and still loved, as men *do* love the home of their youth, even when they have not been altogether happy in it.

Perhaps, too, he might see Meggie. It was about the time that milking should be over, and if it were not too light to betray him, he might venture up to the farmyard gate, by which he had entered on his last return, and, who knows? he might catch a glimpse of her as she came out of the byre.

The thought made Nick's heart quicken and his breath come faster, as he left the glow of the coke-ovens behind him and plunged into the darkness of the November evening.

He walked at first at a smart pace, but, presently, coming to a plantation of firs, through which a foot-path leads by a short cut to Bellister, he slackened a little.

In the old days there used to be a stile to the right, by which foot-passengers crossed from the high-road into the path. Nick knew whereabouts it ought to be; but it was not light enough to see with any distinctness, and he felt along the stone dyke with his hand to discover if the remembered stile were in its old place.

While he was creeping along the bank, groping for the outlet, he heard voices in the plantation not far from where he was; and, presently, other voices, accompanied by the sound of steps, came along the road behind him. Some one in the plantation gave a low whistle.

Nick stopped to listen.

He guessed that the men to whom the voices belonged were poachers, and was unwilling to dis-

turb them, as the consequences to himself were likely enough to be unpleasant.

"Is that ye, Watty?" asked a cautious voice inside the plantation.

A slight rustle had accompanied Nick's movements along the bankside, for it was covered with dry grass and bracken, and he guessed that the sound of his own footsteps had reached the ears of the men on the other side of the wall.

Crouching down where he stood he remained perfectly still.

"I thowt I heared somebody close by," said the same voice, still in the same cautious whisper.

"It was nobbut t' wind," said some one else.

"Hoots, lad! there's nae wind," was the answer. "It'll be a rabbit ye heard. But here they come. That's ye, lads, isn't it?" said the voice in rather a louder tone, as the footsteps which Nick had heard in the road came close up to where he was.

"Ay, whae else?" was the reply, and the steps rustled among the grass and bracken, almost brushing against the crouching figure below the dyke.

"Whisht!" said the first man within the plantation. "There's nae carl to speak sae loud, Watty. Ye're in t' road, remember, and nae private way, as ye seem to think. Hev ye browt t' lucifers?"

"Ay. But it's ower early yet, Jem. It's *ye* that's forgettin' now."

"Nay, I'm none forgettin'. Hae ye been to see if arl's reet?"

"Ay, we can lie quiet in this plantin' till the leets is oot, and then leet up oursel's. Man, what a bonnie lowe——"

"Whisht, ye haufthick (half-witted fellow) ye! Canna ye be quiet?" said the man in the plantation, who had first spoken. "Ye'll ruin arl wi' that tongue o' yours."

"Ruin yersel', lad! Whae is't that's bawlin' now, I sud like to ken? Ye've niver telt us if Bob's been up to Bel—— My, but I'll give it ye if ye hit me that gait again!"

"I diven't care *what* ye dee sae lang's ye're quiet, man. Ay, Bob's been, ye ken where, and the job'll be easy enough. T' auld mon's off."

"Hip, hip, hooray!" The cheer certainly was made under the breath, but it was too noisy, nevertheless, for Jem.

"Man!" he whispered, with rising irritation, "I'll strangle ye if ye diven't haud yer whisht! Ye'll ruin arl, just now, and I wadn't be balked o' this for somethin'. Now come yer ways over and we'll wait in—— Guid sakes, what was that?"

In moving, one of the men in the road had stepped on Nick's foot; and though the sufferer vigorously held his breath, the aggressor uttered an exclamation.

"Save us arl, it's a spy!" he cried, seizing Nick by the collar. "Strike a light, Jem, and let's see whae 'tis."

Nick struggled, but in vain. Many hands were on him, and he was powerless in them.

There was the sound of a match scraping against the box. Apparently it was damp, for, with a muttered oath, it was flung aside, and the scraping began again.

This time there was a flare-up. Nick could see, in the sudden flash, the grass and bracken at his feet, the stones of the rough stone wall in front of him, grim faces looking over, and others close beside him. Then the match was held close to his own face.

"My sangs, if it isn't the stranger!" said several voices together.

Then the match went out.

"Be it whae it may," said the fierce voice of the man they called Jem, "he's in oor pooer. He'll hev to swear never to let on, or——"

"Ay, that will he!" cried the others before the final word could be spoken.

"Div ye hear that, my bantam?" asked one of the men who held Nick, giving him such a shake as a terrier gives a rat. "Ye've spied on us. Ye've heard, mebbe this, mebbe that—onyhoo, mair nor we've a mind. Tak' yer oath to keep a quiet tongue i' yer mooth, and—I winnot just say we'll let ye off arltogether; but, onyhoo, it'll be the better for ye. Refuse, and tak' the consequences.

Certain conditions in men's lives sometimes repeat themselves. Men are tried in a similar way twice over. Sometimes it happens that, having stood the first time, a man falls the second, and *vice versâ*.

Again Nick had the choice thrust upon him of being an accomplice in crime, or suffering grievous hurt for refusing. He had chosen the nobler part once when he was a struggling lad of no reputation. Would he do so again, now that his character was earned?

You, my reader, will of course say "Yes" at once. We know quite well what *you* would do were you in Nick's position.

You will probably scorn him, therefore, when I tell you that there was a long pause, on our hero's part, between the above ultimatum and an answer.

In a flash, such as that just made by the lucifer match, he saw another fir-plantation and himself in the hands of Greyhound Geordie, Matt, and Pete. He felt again the cutting tightness of the cords, and saw Viper's rough little body swinging in front of him.

He had suffered severely for choosing the straight and difficult path, that time. Was there no way, on this occasion, by which he might escape suffering and leave himself free to give the alarm so sorely needed? Suppose he were to swear, as these men desired, and, doing so under compulsion, hold himself quit of his oath and free to save the innocent once he was free himself? He looked at the fierce eyes and scowling faces around him, not with his bodily eyes, for it was now quite dark, but by the light of memory, as supplied by that transitory flash of the little lucifer; and, though Nick was brave—

ay, and had fought his way up to a character for upright honesty—he trembled and hesitated.

The men who held him gave him another shake.

"Ay or no?" they cried. "We'll count three, Jem, and then——"

"Ay, ay, I'm ready," said the brutal voice, which Nick now knew so well, out of the surrounding darkness.

"One—two," began the lighter voice of the man called Watty, and with each word he shook his victim by the collar—"three! Now, yes or no?"

"*No!*" answered Nick, firmly, and he said a word of prayer, for in his ear he seemed to hear the voice of old Colin whispering to him, "Spak' the truth, laddie. It's the only way." And the whisper gave him strength.

Then a fist like a sledge-hammer came down upon his brow, and he took the consequences of his refusal from the hand of the man called Jem.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HOW NICK RETURNED TO BELLISTER.

WHEN Nick came to himself it was no longer dark. The moon was twinkling down upon his face through the gently moving branches of the firs.

For he was no longer on the roadside, but, as he gradually discovered, among the trees of the plantation.

In a dull sort of fashion he noted the black barred-work of the boughs and twigs against the light-filled sky, remarked the strong upstanding toothing of the dark foliage, and said to himself that he was in a plantation of Scotch firs. Scotch firs? What had Scotch firs to say to him? Of what did they remind him? Was it of pain?

His head was aching badly now. He had ached all over once before, and it was, also, under trees like these. What was the connection?

He thought of the kind old face of Colin Campbell. Would he were there now!

Then he thought of Viper, and raised his head a little with infinite difficulty to see if, peradventure, that big cone up there on one of the branches could by any possibility be Viper's little body.

It relieved him greatly to find that it was not so, and he lay still for a while again. From Viper it was not far to Meggie. He thought of her a while, and with her of Bellister.

What was wrong about Bellister? Surely, there was something. Ah, yes!

Like the flash of the lucifer match, memory came back to him, and he struggled to his feet, and began to crawl up the hill, clinging to the trunks of the trees, from one to the other of which he tottered, like a baby learning to walk. A great dread was upon the young fellow, a fear of what he might see, once

the hill was topped and there were no more of those thick Scotch firs to hide from him the view of Bellister.

This dread made him feel even more sick than did the blow which he had received. He was trembling in every limb, weak and feeble as a very young child or very old man. But that dread, though it helped to palsy him, drove him onward, nevertheless, up, up, up, to the top of the hill.

His breath is coming in great gasps before he reaches it. His knees are bending under him. There are only three trees still to be conquered, and then, if the worst has come, he will know it.

But those three trees are hard to conquer. Nick falls more than once before he is over the needle-strewn ground and clasping the rough red bole of the last.

And now that the summit is reached, he hardly dares look towards Bellister lest his eyes should tell him that he is too late to give warning before the horrible deed, which he feels certain is intended, is an accomplished fact. His head, indeed, is swimming so much that, at first, he can see nothing but a reel of Scotch firs jigging around him. But, presently, they settle down into their places again, the moon shines out from a cloud, under which she has been wading, and the view is clear. Yes, there is old Bellister on the slope of the opposite hill across the winding, shining Tyne, its broken walls dark against the darker trees behind, their tops just touched by the moonlight.

Nick's heart bounds as he sees it, for the red glow which he has dreaded so much is not there. There is nothing but dark shadow and cold blue moonlight.

Doubtless, Jem the pitman has done his best to hinder the alarm being given. But, either his hand was lighter than he thought, or Nick's head was more strongly fortified than most which have come within his experience, for "the consequences" have not been quite what was expected, and "the spy" may yet be able to carry his warning in time to circumvent the deed of darkness.

The hope gives new strength to Nick. He forgets his aching head and trembling limbs, as, swiftly, but cautiously, lest he should come upon the enemy lying in wait somewhere on the scrubby hillside, he plunges down the valley.

As he goes he hears the clocks of Haltwhistle strike, and halts for a moment to count the strokes, for he feels that the success of his enterprise hangs upon one, more or less, of those silver-clear bellwords which are falling upon the still night-air.

"*One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.* Can it be only ten?"

It seems an age since he overheard the plot. It seems a lifetime since he "took the consequences" of refusing to betray it. Only ten o'clock! If he have counted right, he may yet be in time. For though, by ten o'clock at latest, Mrs. Ridley is wont to extinguish every light in Bellister, the incendiaries

will, surely, wait till the household has had ample time to fall asleep.

Nick's ears have brought him a message of hope as well as his eyes, and his brain and heart are the steadier for it.

Relieved and refreshed, he runs on again. He is down among the shadows in the valley. He is across the river. He is breasting the hill on which stands the old castle, almost before such a thing seems possible.

Now he is at the farmyard gate. The windows of the farmhouse are all fast shut, like so many sleeping eyes. All is as quiet as Nick so well re-remembers it usually is at Ridley's farm by ten o'clock.

Only the jingle of a cow's chain, and the regular sound of "munch, munch" comes from the byre to show that the inmates are not all unconscious.

Nick crosses the yard, and he knocks cautiously, very cautiously, at the back door. He has not much hope that any one will hear him, but this is how he begins. Viper—maybe Viper will hear him? He had forgotten her presence, and a cold dew breaks out on his forehead as he listens for her passionate little bark. For such an alarm as that may bring the incendiaries upon the scene prematurely, and with evil consequences to all concerned.

But Viper does not bark. Probably she is sleeping in her old quarters again, and Nick's movements have been too quiet for the sound of them to reach even her little prick ears.

Nick waits a moment at the door. But minutes are much too precious to be lost, and, finding that he may wait there any number of minutes without much chance of being let in, he bethinks himself of Meggie's window.

He knows that she always sleeps—or used to sleep—in a little room over the back-kitchen, and that there is a water-butt under her window, on which he has climbed many and many a time when a boy to tap at the pane in the early mornings when the two had a stolen bird-nesting or mushrooming in prospect.

Why not do so now?

He has never felt the slightest compunction about doing it before. Why should he now have a sort of uncomfortable shrinking, as though he were himself a thief in the night, instead of there to give warning against worse than thieves?

Needless to say, Nick does not stay to ask himself any such question; and yet his heart is beating quickly as he hoists himself on to the moss-grown edge of the water-butt and taps with his knuckles upon the tiny window-pane.

It is a light and timid tap. It might almost be the tap of one of the ivy-leaves which creep round the casement. But, strange to say, it wakes the sleeper within, sound sleeper though Meggie Ridley has always been.

Nick's heart beats still faster as he hears the movement within. He hears the striking of a lucifer for the third time that night. (Will he ever

cease to feel those queer sensations whenever he hears the scratching of a match?) Then comes a light within, which casts a slender shadow upon the blind. There is the shadow of curly hair about the head, and the outline of the little tipped-up nose. Nick thought he would have known it anywhere. And yet the look of that shadow startles him. It is not the little shadow which his child friend used to cast on wall and daisied grass when he and she played together in the sun in those days of long go. It is a shadow so much longer and—— Well, Nick has not time just then to find another adjective, for the blind is cautiously pushed aside and a face looks out.

There is a glint of moonlight on it, making the eyes shine and skin look satin-smooth, and catching at the gold threads in the tumbled curly hair. The sight of it makes Nick's breath come faster than before.

It is Meggie's face, and yet not just the Meggie he remembers.

The child Meggie was roguish and masterful in look. But *this* Meggie, what is she?

Ah, there is something about this Meggie much too wonderful to be made out all at once. Or so, at least, it seems to Nick.

"Whae is't?" she asks breathlessly. For though the girl's face is lighted, that which looks at her through the window-pane is darkly shadowed.

As no immediate answer is forthcoming, a look of alarm, which had been growing upon the

face inside, deepens, and the blind is quickly dropped.

Nick begins to fear that she has gone to raise the alarm. He has not counted on this, for the old Meggie had never been wont to look scared when he tapped at her bedroom window. This new Meggie disconcerts him.

But he need not have been afraid. For, alarming though it is for a girl to see a man looking in at her window in the night, Meggie Ridley is a self-possessed little personage, and has all her wits about her.

She quickly returns with a light, raises the blind again, and looks the intruder steadily in the face.

And then she nearly shrieks in spite of all her self-possession.

"Nick!" she says. "Nick! Why, lad, it's never thoo?"

So she recognizes him after all!

Although he has changed so much for the better that it might have been more of a compliment had his old playfellow failed to see in him the ragamuffin Nick of long ago, the young man cannot help feeling a throb of gladness at this prompt recognition.

But there is no time then for leisurely tasting of the joys of re-union, old friends though those two are.

At a sign from him she opens the window.

"Meggie," he whispers, "mak' nae noise, but

rouse yer folk and get oot o' the hoose as sharp as ye can. There's some chaps frae the pit comin' to set ye afire. Whisht!"—he puts up his finger hurriedly as he saw a look of terror come into the girl's blue eyes. "Divn't mak' a sound, but dae as I say; I'm off for the police."

"Oh! Nick, Nick, dinnot gan! Whatever shall we dae if they come while ye're awa'?"

"Ye've nae men i' the hoose?"

"No, nobbut Teddy, and *he's* nae good, pier lad! Faither's away, and we get a man frae Haltwhistle now to dae the wark. Nick, diven't leave us."

She puts her hand out of the window, and lays it on that of her old playfellow with a confiding gesture which goes to the young man's heart.

"I wadn't, if I could help 't, Meggie," he says earnestly. "I'll be back as sharp as I can. But somebody must gan. There're not enough o' us here to stop the rascals. Be sure and mak' nae noise, and keep a light burnin'. They're nobbut waitin' a bit to be sure ye're arl abed. If ye show that ye ken what's up, I wadn't answer for *what* they might dae; for they're gey and angry wi' yer faither."

"Ay, I ken," answers the girl. "And sae might ye be and arl, Nick, if arl remembered their wrangs, for ye've been badly tret. I wonder——"

"Whisht, lass! Say nae mair," answers Nick, hurriedly, though the girl's wistful words and look are as balm to his heart. "There's nae time to crack now. The suner I gan the suner I'll be back,

Keep up yer courage, lass; wi' God's help we may get off yet."

He catches the little hand, wrings it hard, and noiselessly lowering himself from the water-butt, hurries away.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IN THE NICK O' TIME.

If Nick had before been keen to reach Bellister, he was now still more so to return to it. He had seen Meggie again, and the sight of her had acted on him like a cordial.

He ceased to feel his aching head; strength returned to his limbs. He even forgot to speculate as to what her father might have to say to him on his return. To bring help to Meggie, and to be at hand to protect her, was the object of all his endeavour. As for the safety of Mrs. Ridley and that of her son Teddy, he hardly thought of it at all, except as it concerned the happiness of his old playfellow. For had not Meggie recognized him at once? Had she not appealed to him for protection? That recognition, that appeal had made a new man of Nick. The little episode of the trial, when the girl had seemed to stand aloof, to put such a distance between herself and her old friend,

had melted away from his memory. Meggie herself had effaced it. For she had met him on the old familiar ground; nay, better, for, even in the midst of her own danger, she had remembered his feelings sufficiently to drop a word of regret for the way in which he had been treated.

No wonder he forgot his broken head, or at least scorned to think of it. He had got it in Meggie's service. He was Meggie's champion, and that was enough for Nick just then.

He wasted no time in Haltwhistle. Only waiting long enough to see the sergeant of police and summon assistance, he was off again to Bellister as fast as his legs could carry him.

The old castle was still dark, except for the uncertain moonlight, when he left the town and crossed the bridge over the river. But, hardly was he on the other side, than a sudden flush of colour tinged the cold blueness of the sky. A red tongue of flame shot upward, like a dart, from the hill.

Nick came to a sudden stand, as though he had been shot; then, catching up the branch of a tree which was lying near him in the road, he rushed on as hard as his legs could carry him, with set teeth and panting breath. Before he was up the hill, however, the red tongue of flame had spread to a broad crimson banner, bordered with a fringe of black smoke, which seemed to wave from the keep of the old castle.

The red glow of the fire quenched the moonlight, as the sun makes a candle turn pale. The broken

walls stood out dark and massive against the glowing background, casting strong shadows across the grass. The trees, the house, the stacks, and the farm-buildings all sprang into vivid relief of red and black and yellow.

The sight was as beautiful as it was terrible, and was visible for miles around. In lonely farmhouses and shepherds' cottages upon the moors, men were awakened by the red reflection, and said to themselves that "surely, the sun was rising early for the time of year."

To Nick the suddenness with which the flames had flared up was the most terrible part of the business. It seemed to him at first as though help would come too late to save anything. So great was the light that he thought the whole homestead must be on fire, and he trembled for the safety of the inhabitants.

As he came nearer, however, he found that, so far, less harm was done than he expected. One of the stacks was alight and burning brightly, but that was all as yet. The house and buildings were quite untouched, though he could hear the cattle blaring noisily in the byres, frightened by the red light of the flames which shone through every chink.

He avoided entering by the farmyard gate, and crept round by the ruins, thinking it probable that Meggie might have taken shelter there with her mother and brother if she had not been able to get away altogether. For, so far as the fire went, the

ruins were safe enough, indeed, the only safe place upon the premises, for there was nothing left which could burn about the grim old walls.

The flicker of the flames within the stack-yard came through the loopholes of the keep, and soon showed him that he was right in his guess. For, no sooner was he within the walls than he saw Meggie stealing along in their shadow towards him.

She grasped his arm.

"Mother and Teddy are down in the dungeon," she whispered. "But I couldn't bide; I'm flayed o' their firin' the byre. Hark, how my pier coos is blarin! Nick, we maun creep round and let them oot. I canna bide to hear them carl me."

"Where are the men?"

"In t' stack-yard. Look, there's yan o' them tryin' to fire anither stack! It disn't burn quick enough to content them. It's that quiet to-neet. And—Guid presarve us arl, Nick! If that isn't that villain Jem Green that hates faither the worst o' them arl! See, he's carryin' a leet to the little cart-shed, and Viper's in there. Diven't ye hear her barkin'? They're mad wi' her for that. Nick, let's open the little back winder. They'll niver think o' that. I canna hev Viper burnt."

Without waiting for Nick to give his opinion, Meggie bounded from his side, and made a dash for the cart-shed. Fear for her dumb friends seemed to have taken from her all care for her own safety.

Nick followed her, creeping along in the shadow

lest he should attract to her the attention he was so anxious to avoid.

Till help came—and oh! how slow seemed the movements of those he had summoned!—the only chance of defence lay in remaining unperceived. Could this be done, it might be possible for himself and Meggie to save the cattle; but, once the defenders of Bellister betrayed their presence, Nick's experience of the assailants told him that no mercy was to be expected at their hands. Six desperate men bent on revenge were not to be openly resisted by one lad and lass.

But Meggie's precipitation was fatal at that moment, and brought about the very danger that he feared.

She was but half way between the ruins and the buildings when she tripped upon a stone and fell headlong, uttering, involuntarily, as she did so, a little gasping sound, which at once attracted the attention of a man who was crossing the grass with a lighted torch.

"Hullo!" he said, "what's this? Why, as I live, it's Ridley's lass. She turned up her nose at me t'other day, the hizzy! She shall pay for it now."

He was stooping down over the girl and about to seize her roughly by the arm, when the thick branch of a Scotch fir came down with crashing weight upon his head.

The man neither saw who gave the blow, nor uttered a sound when he received it. He went

down where he stood, and lay like a log, and Nick felt that his own broken head was avenged.

Lifting up Meggie, he drew her, shuddering and half sobbing, into the shelter of the wall.

She clung to him with both her hands.

"Nick—oh! Nick!" she gasped.

"Whisht, Meggie," he whispered back reassuringly. "I've settled that yan; it's Jem, I think. And t' others diven't seem to have heard. Keep yersel' quiet, lassie, and I'll creep roun' an let oot the pier beasts. It's them that's maist in danger now I've settled the man whae was after Viper. Eh dear! are yon chaps *niver* comin' frae Haltwhistle?"

He crept cautiously onward round the corner of the buildings, closely followed by Meggie, who did not seem able to stay by herself. Together they entered the byre, which had already caught fire, entered it, undid the chains from the necks of the frightened cows, and left them to make their escape by the open door, which they speedily did.

Viper, meantime, was howling piteously, and, as Nick and his companion came again into the open air, they were appalled at seeing the roof of the little cart-shed, which was made of heather-thatch, old and very dry, in a bright blaze. There were men round the door, but the little building might yet be entered, without their knowledge, by the window at the back.

It would not be an easy enterprise, however, to get in and out unscathed; and Nick hesitated, as

much to leave Meggie alone outside as to risk himself within the burning building.

Had Meggie not been there he would not have thought twice about the danger to himself in his eagerness to save his dog friend. But with Meggie herself in danger it was a different matter, for he felt that the human friend came first.

Meggie, however, seemed to be of a different opinion. Viper's howls of terror made her forget everything but the peril of her favourite. She clasped her hands, and turned her agonized blue eyes on Nick.

"Save Viper," she cried. "Lad, ye'll niver let the bit doggie burn?"

That was more than the young fellow could resist. He flung prudence to the winds, scaled the wall of the little cart-shed by the help of the hen-ladder which served as a means of entrance to the poultry which lodged within, and disappeared through the window under the burning roof. Not till Nick was out of sight did Meggie's fears awake for him.

"Mebbe, he'll be burned and arl," she said to herself in an agony; "and he but new come back! Oh! what will I do wi'out Nick and Viper? I'll away down the hill and tell the folk that's comin' to mak' haste."

She sped away at the top of her speed, careless now as to whether she were seen or not.

The little cart-shed was full of smoke. It would have been impossible for Nick to have breathed in

it at all, but that a part of the roof had given way in one corner, leaving a space by which the smoke of the burning thatch could in some measure escape into the open air. For the thatch was burning both inside and out, bits of it constantly falling on to the stone floor, and smouldering there among the peats and chicken-litter which lay about.

Fortunately the fire had not yet reached that part of the roof which covered the pile of straw where the terrier had her bed. It was at the same place where Nick had slept on his last arrival at the farm, and, instinctively, he made his way towards it. For, by this time, Viper had ceased to bark, and there was no sound to guide him to her whereabouts. Nor were his eyes much more useful than his ears, because of the blinding smoke which came from the burning thatch.

"Viper!" he called, as well as his half-suffocated condition would allow him—"Viper!"

At the sound of his voice there was a feeble rustling among the straw, and something seemed to drag itself painfully to his feet.

"Is't thoo, Viper?"

Nick stooped, and a hairy bundle threw itself upon him, licking his face, and making little strangled noises of joy and relief. It was Viper, sure enough. He took the little creature into his arms and made a rush with her back to the little window by which he had entered. But the fire had got the start of him, and was licking with its fierce red tongues all round the opening.

There was no longer any way out there. Nick felt his very heart turn sick within him.

The terrier lay still in his arms. The little spark of life which she had shown on recognizing him seemed to have been choked out of her by the suffocating smoke, which was, notwithstanding the fact that the roof at the further end of the shed had fallen in, fast exhausting the air of the building.

For the second time that evening Nick felt his head whirl and his limbs reel. If he did not soon escape from the burning shed he felt that all would be quickly over with him.

Hardly knowing what he did, yet, all the while, keeping his hold on the dog, he staggered across the floor and made for the door.

What did he care whether or not there were men around it ready to knock him down when he appeared! Anything was better than this awful pressure on brain and throat and chest, which took from him thought and voice and breath. Only to be out—out of this suffocation into the fresh, cool, open air. Only to be out—out!

After what seemed to him like crossing miles of scorching desert, though it was but a few feet of stone floor, Nick reached the door and fell against it. His ears were full of a roaring, as of the sea. He could see nothing.

Still mechanically holding the dog against him with one hand and arm, he fumbled for the fastening with the other. Found it. Shook

it in frantic agony with all his remaining power. In vain. The door held. It was locked on the outside!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BEST BEDROOM.

AFTER that moment of awful, suffocating despair at the door of the little cart-shed, when he believed that life was over for him, Nick knew no more till he opened his eyes in the best bedroom of Bellister Castle Farm.

He did not know at first that it *was* the best bedroom. Indeed, the idea of himself in that sacred apartment was not to be entertained without convincing proof. To be found peeping into "the best bedroom" had been a crime in Mrs. Ridley's eyes in the old days. Nick never forgot one unfortunate occasion, on which, when he and Meggie were playing hide-and-seek, he found her ensconced behind the sage-green curtains of the bed, and was found by Mrs. Ridley, in his turn, before he could withdraw from the sacred precincts. And, yet, now, on recovering from his unconscious state, it was those very sage green moreen hangings on which his eyes first rested. He looked at them with wonder. He could see the yellowish stripes which the sun had painted in the folds. He could see the satin-

patched quilt, that triumph of Mrs. Ridley's art, in the making of which all her cronies had assisted in the days when he was a boy. He remembered it quite well, and how it had looked in the frame, when he had admired it at such a respectful distance as could alone be permitted to a boy, especially when the boy was such a waif of society as himself.

There, too, was the big mahogany chest-of-drawers, with the case of wax flowers on the top. There, over the chimney-piece, was the gaudy picture he had once looked on as the highest of high art—Moses in the Bulrushes. Such a pink Moses, such blue water, such green rushes, as, surely, Nature could never equal, let alone surpass! And there—*could* there anywhere else but in the Bellister best bedroom be a sampler such as he saw hanging up in a black frame on the opposite wall? He knew every stitch of it, for he had watched Meggie put them in, every stitch of those peacocks and palm-trees, which were, next to the Moses, in Nick's estimation, the greatest masterpieces at Bellister.

Yes, it *looked* like the best bedroom, and, yet, if it were, how came he, Nick, to be lying there, enthroned on the couch of state?

Could he be dead? and had they laid him out here as the last and greatest honour that could be paid him?

Just for a moment this terrible solution of the mystery seemed the most likely one to Nick, and a cold dew broke out on his forehead at the thought,

The next it was dispelled, for, raising his head, he caught sight of Viper lying by the bedside.

The terrier, whose brown eyes were open and vigilant, caught sight of him at the same instant, and in the frantic ecstasy of a devoted dog who recognizes a long-lost master, she made one bound, and was on to the satin quilt, utterly reckless of all its glories, and of the risks which they were running of being dimmed by contact with her smutty coat.

She barked, she howled with excess of joy, wagging her ropy tail, licking Nick's face with her rough little tongue, and nearly suffocating him again with the fervour of her caresses.

"Here, doctor, step this way," Nick heard some one say at the door; and then it opened, and in came Dr. Shield of Haltwhistle, followed by John Ridley himself.

"Why, Nick, my lad!" exclaimed the farmer heartily, as he saw that the young man was conscious. "Hast coom roond? Doctor"—he turned to the man of medicine—"ye're not wanted after arl! Eh, but he must hev a fine constitution, must Nick. If ye'd been at hame and cud hae come yesterday, ye'd have seen a vara different sight. We had Dr. Billow here, and he said he would meet you this mornin', but he hadn't muckle hopes. Hey, Dr. Billow, is that you, sir? No need of a consultation now; yer patient'll do, I guess. Eh?"

The farmer rubbed his hands, while Nick looked on in wonder.

Could this be the stern, old John Ridley he used to know—the man who could not even bear the mention of his name? If so, what could have changed him to such an extent?

This question was almost as puzzling as the why and wherefore he, Nick, was lying in Mrs. Ridley's best bedroom. Both were beyond the patient's power to solve just then.

Meantime, however, it was a delightful novelty to feel himself of so much consequence in the household at Bellister.

The fact of his lying in the best bedroom was merely the type of all the attentions he enjoyed. He who had been before a wageless servant, driven about from pillar to post, and treated no better than a dog, was now dealt with as an honoured guest.

John Ridley was constantly looking in to see how he did. Mrs. Ridley, though her pursed-up lips and set expression showed that the present arrangement was no doing of hers, and had been duly protested against beforehand, fell in with it sufficiently to fail in no care which was necessary for the patient's recovery. And Meggie? Well, Meggie, was the indefatigable nurse, the guardian-angel, as Nick thought, of the sick-room.

Weak and puzzled, yet happy and at rest, he watched this new Meggie moving about him, smoothing his pillow, giving him beef-tea, looking at him, when she thought he slept, with tender solicitude in her pretty eyes.

She had still the same plump little figure, still the same curly hair, still the same apple-blossom face; and the little dimple in the soft cheek showed that smiles and roguery still lurked within, ready to be called up when the gravity of the nurse could be relaxed and the natural Meggie allowed to re-appear.

The old Meggie had always been the admiration of poor down-trodden Nick, and he had been fonder of her than of any one in the world. But as he lay and watched her, this new Meggie seemed to him more admirable still, more worthy of reverent love.

"Happy the lad that gets her!" sighed poor Nick, and a little sadness soured even the sweetness of the best bedroom, as he thought that this dainty little blossom of Bellister could never be reached by such as he.

"Yes, yes, Mr. Ridley, the lad'll do well enough," the doctors had said to the farmer, as they followed him downstairs. "That blow on his head, followed by the dose of smoke, was enough to make an end of most men. But this fellow must have the skull of an elephant and the digestion of an ostrich. He only wants rest and care, and in a few days he'll be as good as ever. He's led a healthy, sober life, has that lad, it's evident to see, or he'd never have come round as he has. Ay, he's a fine-grown fellow, and his constitution seems sound as a bell. You wouldn't say that he was picked out of the gutter if you hadn't known. Eh, Mr. Ridley?"

"Ye're reet, sir," answered John. "I always said there was the makin's of a good un in pier Nick. But then, ye see, we did weel by him here."

Both doctors glanced at each other with an amused smile. For the Ridleys' treatment of their "servant lad" was pretty well known in Haltwhistle.

"Well, well, it's to be hoped you'll reap the equivalent," remarked one of them.

"Reap as you've sown, eh?" said the other.

John Ridley's shrewd grey eyes twinkled. He was not going to be hoodwinked by any doctors.

"Well, sirs," he said dryly, "the proof o' the puddin's in the eatin'. Yon lad's shown arlready that he kens his freends. I'd hae been a ruined man this day if it hadna been for him. He cam' in the vara nick o' time to save us, did Nick, as I've telt them arl. Ha! ha! Twae ricks and a byre, and the roof o' a cart-shed is bad enough to lose, but a hale onstead wad hae been a deal worse. Nay, nay, he's not ungrateful, is Nick. He's a credit to our upbringin', sir. What d'ye think?" He lowered his voice and nudged his family-doctor with his elbow. "They tell me he's a bit place o' his ain, besides a thrivin' business, and he but one-and-twenty."

"He's profited by your lessons, Mr. Ridley."

"Ay, ye may say sae," said the farmer, with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"And, yet, that fellow's made a useless wreck of the son of the house," remarked one doctor to the

other as they went down the hill. "Small blame to him, poor fellow, of course, for he was vilely treated, whatever Ridley may say. But I never thought the old man would have forgiven the blow and the shame of the discovery. Young Ridley's a ruined man, both in body and character, and he's the only son."

"Maybe, old Ridley is thinking of getting another," was the answer, in an amused tone of voice. "He's an eye to business, has John. And though this Nick's a nobody, he's a fine fellow, nevertheless, and would be very useful in many ways. You heard what Ridley said about the little fortune? Ay, depend on it, it's not only gratitude for the timely warning that saved Bellister which is at the bottom of our friend's tactics."

"But he's hardly a match for bonnie Meggie, is he? There's many a young chap of a good stock who would jump at being John Ridley's son-in-law, little as the man is liked. Why should she take up with a workhouse lad?"

"Why?" The other doctor pursed up his lips and gave vent to a low whistle. "Don't ask *me* why, my friend. Why has the lass refused such good matches as young Bates of Bewcastle, and Lambert of Low Row, but for very good reasons of her own? She knows what she's about, does Meggie Ridley, I fancy, just as her father does. Though, I take it, her reasons are a bit different. Did you see how she looked at that lad just now? No? Well then, *I* did, and I've drawn my

conclusions. Only a child when she saw him last? Yes, yes, I grant you that. But a childish heart is not always a fickle one, my dear sir; and when lads and lasses have been bairns together there's many a seed sown that's quick to spring up when they meet each other in after-years. Consider, too, the romantic conditions under which these two have met again. A fire—danger—the lad risking his life to save the girl's favourite—the rescuer apparently dead—she nursing him back to life—gratitude—pity. You can understand what is likely to come next? No? Well, well, you've no young people of your own as *I* have."

So the doctors talked, and doctors, as you know, are generally supposed to have keen eyes, and more than the usual ability for seeing things which lie just under them. Listening to their grave gossip, therefore, may help us to forecast the future of our two friends Meggie and Nick, which, indeed, even for those who were not behind the scenes it was not hard to do.

The doctor, it is true, was no longer wanted by our hero; but the nurse was. Nay, the stronger he grew the more he wanted her, which is not always the case between nurse and patient. In a very few days Nick was downstairs again, and quite convalescent. Yet he still stayed on at Bellister, occupying its best bedroom, and making large demands on the time of its pretty little mistress.

In spite of Mrs. Ridley's pursed-up mouth and protesting air, the two old comrades wandered

again through the ruins and reminded each other of the adventures of long ago. Nick helped Meggie to milk, with Viper lying beside them in the empty stall, and the cows clanking their chains and chewing the cud of sweet recollection in those which were occupied, just as the milkers were doing, as they drew down the milk into the frothing pails. And if neither the lad nor the lass said a word which might not have been said when they were bairns, it was not for want of wishing it—on Nick's side, at least.

For, happy though he was amidst the scenes of long ago, Nick dared not look ahead. He could speak glibly enough of the past, but his tongue was tied on the subject of the future. He looked at and longed for the bonnie blossom which, it seemed to him, hung high over his head above the old grey walls of Bellister. He took delight in her fragrant shadow, but still he said to himself that she was far above his reach.

How should the son of Greyhound Geordie and Tramping Sal wear such a blossom in his buttonhole? She might put up with him, indeed, as a friend, for the sake of "Auld Lang Syne." But that he should ever be anything nearer and dearer was not to be expected. Nor would her father, Nick was certain, ever allow it.

And there was another bar between them which was still more unsurmountable, as Nick felt, and this was Teddy. Every time his eyes rested on the handsome, dark-haired young man, crouched in the

chimney-corner, with his bent back and his vacant face, a pang went through the heart of the lad whose hand had been, not, certainly, the first cause, but, at all events, the direct instrument in bringing about this human wreck.

That he should have so forgotten himself as to strike down Meggie's brother was a terrible thought to Nick. And he felt that as he could never forgive himself when he looked on Teddy, neither would the Ridleys ever really be able to forget what he had done.

Mrs. Ridley, he knew well enough, had not forgiven him, and, kind though Ridley and Meggie were, even though they seemed to have forgiven him in consideration of what he had done and suffered in their service, he could not but feel that Teddy must be always a standing reproach. He said nothing, therefore, which could be construed into courtship; but, probably, his eyes spoke instead of his tongue, and those of bonnie Meggie answered him.

Anyhow Meggie's father thought so.

"Weel, weel," he said, one day, to his wife, as he stood at the kitchen door with his pipe in his mouth, watching the two young people as they crossed the yard on their way to the milking—"whativer ye may be pleased to say, missus, if it wasn't for *yan* thing, I'd gie them my blessin', for Nick suits me and Meggie down to the ground, now he's got a name and a position as weel. I'll hev to chuck up the viewing now, and him and me could

mak' a gey bit brass if I gave him a hand wi' cattle-dealin.' He'd come in handy, there's nae denyin' it, and Meggie likes him as she's niver liked ony yan else. 'Deed, missus, say what ye like, I'd give my consent but for *yan* thing, as I said afore, and that's Trampin' Sal, if as folks sez, she's the moother o' this lad. Guid sakes, but she'd be a mouthful! It wad tak' a wider throat than maist men's made wi' to swally Trampin' Sal.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SWALLOWING OF TRAMPING SAL.

"IF it wasn't for Trampin' Sal." These words of John Ridley's had been spoken pretty loud, and they had reached the ears of Sal's son, as he crossed the yard a little behind his companion. "If it wasn't for Trampin' Sal, I'd gie them my blessin'."

This speech of Meggie's father buzzed on in Nick's ears like the haunting burden of some song to the accompaniment of the frothing milk, all that evening milking-time, and made him so silent and distraught that Meggie wondered what could be the matter with her companion.

"If it wasn't for Trampin' Sal." The bugbear of his boyhood had risen up before him again and was barring his way to better things, just as she had done in the old days. Although he had now

but little doubt that she was his mother, Nick felt that he hated Tramping Sal. His mother, and yet the bane of his life! It was terrible, but it was true.

Nick looked round the tail of the cow that he was milking, and stole a glance at the dainty fair head of Meggie, her sweet brow resting against the side of the hornless black Galloway which she was busy with, her fresh young voice crooning away at some old song, such as cows love to hear when they are being milked. Then he thought of the coarse, red face and squalid head, and the loud, rough voice of Tramping Sal. "Look here, upon this picture, and on this." The very comparison seemed an insult to the girl beside him, and made him shudder as he looked.

Tramping Sal and Meggie Ridley! The two could hardly be thought of together. And, yet, the one was separating him from the other. The thought filled Nick with rage.

Was it, then, possible that, but for Tramping Sal, John Ridley was ready to overlook all other impediments and take him, the once despised servant-lad, as his son-in-law? Was it possible?

The bare idea of such a thing seemed like a glimpse of Heaven to a man who has thought of himself irrevocably shut out.

It was rapture; but it made his position yet more unendurable. For Tramping Sal barred the way to bliss, and Tramping Sal could not be done away with.

She had recovered, as Nick had heard, from her accident, and was now much the same woman as before, only, if possible, still less desirable as a relation. But she had not lately been seen in Haltwhistle; and Nick began to wonder how it would be if she never turned up again.

No one seemed to know for certain that she *was* his mother. Haltwhistle people knew less about it than he, Nick, did. He had refused to own her in the old days. Why should he own her now when the claim of kinship would damage his prospects more than ever?

Was it necessary that he should tell John Ridley of that death-bed revelation of Greyhound Geordie's?

As these questions put themselves in Nick's mind, the byre-door opened and a boy looked in.

Nick got up and went to him.

Meggie paused in her milking to listen.

"Ye're wanted at t' Union," said the boy. "It's aboot the woman they ca' Trampin' Sal," he added, as Nick looked at him blankly.

"Trampin' Sal!" cried Meggie. "She's niver turned up again! Dinna gan, Nick. Ye needna be feared on her now; but ye'd better not gan near her. She'll fasten on ye like a leech if ye gie her the chance. *I* ken Sally!"

Still the young man said nothing. He stood looking at the messenger, with the blood in his cheeks and his lips compressed.

"Whae sent ye, laddie?" asked Meggie. "Was it Sal?"

"Nay, it was the Union-maister," answered the boy. "But it's aboot Sal, for arl that. He's akin to her, folks says."

He nodded his head towards Nick as he spoke.

"What folks says is nothin'," answered Meggie, with some heat. "She's nae claim on ye, Nick. Ye always said she hadn't," she went on, turning to the tall young man who was hanging his head by the door, just as he used to do in former days when Tramping Sal appeared.

It vexed Meggie to see the old shamefaced look upon the face of the man who was now her hero.

"But she's vara bad. Ye maun joost gan," persisted the boy. "The maister said I was to fetch you back."

"Ye winnot dae that, onyhoo," cried Meggie, hotly. "Gan aboot yer business this meenit, Willy. If Maister Grant gans at arl, which he winnot dae if he tak's *ma* advice, ye can tell the Union folks to wait his pleasure."

The boy ran off quickly, for Meggie, sweet though she usually was, had inherited some of her father's and mother's temper, and could show it when roused.

When the messenger was gone, she got up from her milking-stool and came and stood by Nick.

"Lad," she said, and all the anger had gone out of her voice while she laid a hand softly on his arm—"lad, thoo's nae carl to mind Trampin' Sally now, nor naebody owther. Thoo's above such as her, Nick, and I diven't believe—I *never* did—that she's moother to such as thoo."

There was a tender familiarity in her touch and in the use of the homely northern "thoo" which went to Nick's heart, revealing, as it did to him, that he stood near to the heart of his old playmate. But he found nothing to say in return. The struggle which had been going on within him since he had overheard those words of John Ridley's had reached a painful crisis.

Nick felt that this was a turning-point in his life; that his whole future hung in the balance, dependent on the way he acted now. Therefore, though he longed to take the little hand which rested on his arm, and tell its owner that no Tramping Sals should ever stand between him and her, his hands were chained.

Meggie said no more, but she looked distressed. She took her hand from his arm, picked up her milking-pail, and hastily left the byre, leaving Nick to fight his battle alone with the cows and Viper.

Poor Nick! He had been many a time tempted before; he had fought many a hard battle—only those like him, who are the inheritors of a double portion of evil, know *how* hard—but this was the sorest strife of all.

There are times in each life, generally when that life has, through much tribulation, been raised to a high standard, that a specially strong temptation is sent to test it. Common temptations have been resisted again and again. The devil has learnt that they are useless, and he makes a final effort

to drag the nature down by a temptation which is as subtle as it is strong.

It was such a cunning trick of the great wrestler that Nick had now to abide.

Would it be so very wrong to repudiate this wretched mother of his, who had never treated him as a mother should treat her son? No one knew what Greyhound Geordie had told him. No one need ever know.

To obey this summons would be to acknowledge her openly; and to acknowledge her meant to give up all hope of Meggie.

It was a choice between drunken, reprobate Tramping Sal, and bonnie, white-souled Meggie Ridley. Could any man hesitate which to choose? It was, indeed, a hard struggle, and strangely did the forces within him range themselves. The good within him sided with Tramping Sal, the evil with Meggie Ridley. Nick felt his soul torn in two.

But it was not in vain that on other occasions he had wrestled and thrown his foe. The habit was there.

And besides, there were other wrestlers there on the ground of his soul besides Tramping Sal and Meggie Ridley, besides Repulsion and Inclination, besides his own worse and better natures. There was Satan, and there was One who is stronger than he.

Old Colin Campbell, also, rose up, and stood on the side which seemed at first the weaker; and

again, in the dim light of the lantern in Bellister byre, Nick heard the whisper which had helped him before: "Spak' the truth, laddie. It's the only way."

He listened. The struggle within him gradually ceased. Satan and Inclination were vanquished and fled away, and Nick resolutely turned from the bonnie face which had sided with them. Yes, he would do right. He would cast aside the grapes which looked so fair. Not because he could not reach them would he call them sour, but because they were forbidden fruit. He would do his duty, cost him what it might. And his duty was to go to Tramping Sal, own himself her son, and do the best he could for his wretched mother.

"Virtue," the copy-books tell us, "is its own reward." But however true this may be in the long run, it is not always so at once. And, when Nick returned, two hours later, he was not feeling at all as the virtuous who have done their duty are supposed to feel. His immediate sensations were those of a patient who has just swallowed a very nasty dose of medicine, and who has another in prospect before he has time to get the taste of the first out of his mouth. Medicine, of course, as we all know, does good in the end, but the immediate results are by no means pleasant. And, it seems to me, that the immediate effects of doing a disagreeable duty are much the same. You may swallow it bravely, but you cannot prevent the wry face and the nasty after-taste.

Tramping Sal, as John Ridley had truly said, was a difficult mouthful to swallow.

Nick had found her particularly difficult, and as he again mounted the hill to Bellister she was still sticking in his throat and threatening to disagree with him in the near future. He had found her even worse than he had expected; for four more years of drink and disorder had brought her to a still lower state of degradation than that in which he had last seen her. He pitied the diseased and shattered object she had become. But, though the story she told him fitted in with that of Greyhound Geordie and left Nick no doubt that he was their son, he could in no wise feel towards her as a son should towards his mother.

She had cried maudlin tears over her "dear bairn," her "bonny jewel." She had shaken her feeble fist at the mention of her husband, and received his dying message with an exclamation of, "Brave words and brutal deeds—that's Geordie Grant arl over! I'm weel shot on him. I nobbut wish he'd got his deserts, and tried the gallows, as I arlways said he wad."

The two exhibitions of affection and hatred on the part of the wife and mother had equally repulsed and disgusted the son.

But he had done his duty by her, nevertheless, as the Union authorities were willing to allow, and had paid for her keep like a man. And now he was on his way back to Bellister to make a clean breast of it to Meggie's father, and to say good-bye,

as he said to himself, for the last time, to the old castle and its inmates.

Poor Nick! He felt as though with his own hand he were shutting the gates of Paradise against him, after that short peep of the glories within. And, oh! it was bitter, bitter, deliberately to go out once more into the outer darkness! He set his teeth and breathed hard, but he had made his choice now and he must go through with it.

John Ridley's face fell as Nick got out his confession. It was evident to see how disappointed he was, and when Nick spoke of leaving immediately, he half rose from his chair, as though to stop him. But he restrained himself.

"Ye're reet, lad"—with a sigh. "It goes again' me to part wi' ye; but, after what ye've telt me, I see nae ither way. I didn't mair nor half believe the clash aboot ye and that hizzy, Trampin' Sal, but since ye've owned her yersel', why then——"

He stopped short, for his daughter Meggie had stolen into the room and was standing behind his chair.

"Nick's gannin', lass," he said to her. "It seems what folks says aboot him and Trampin' Sal is over true. He's owned up to her, like an honest lad, and, like an honest lad, he's made up his mind to the consequences. Say good-bye to him, Meggie, since go he must. And"—John Ridley looked round to make sure that his wife was nowhere near—"if ye've a mind to gie him a buss ahint the door, I winnot deny 't him, since it's t' last time; for ye're

auld playmates, and he's an honest lad, is Nick, whatever his faither and moother may be."

But Meggie was not the lass to own her love behind doors. She came forward openly, took the young man's offered hand, and held up her cheek for his kiss.

"It's not good-bye, lad," she said softly but firmly; "neither, if thoo's pleased to have 't sae, is it for t' last time. Gan if thoo must, and bide awa' as lang's thoo pleases, thou'lt find me waitin' on thee when thoo comes back to Bellister."

What could Nick do then but take the offered kiss, and vow that if ever her father should send for him he would come on the instant.

Nor did John Ridley make any opposition. Perhaps he was too much taken by surprise. As for Nick, when he went away he carried with him the feeling that there is a reward for virtue after all, and that the gates of Paradise could never quite shut behind him so long as one loving hand was there to hold them ajar.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

Is it necessary to tell you the end of the story after what has been said in the last chapter? I hardly think it is, for have you not already guessed it?

Yet, as there are some readers still remaining, even at this late hour of the rapid nineteenth century, who object to being left to finish a story for themselves, we will respect their wishes and cut off the threads of the web that we have been weaving neatly at the ends.

Tramping Sal did not trouble either Haltwhistle or this world much longer after her final return to her native town. Fortunately for her son, that first visit to her as his mother was, also, the last, and she retired from the scenes within the year after she ceased to tramp.

Nick, meanwhile, had been steadily following his business, which grew daily, and putting by a little hoard, spite of what he had to spend on his mother, in the hope that it might one day help to keep a wife.

Nor was that day so very long in coming, after all. For, shortly after Tramping Sal had taken herself out of the way, the summons which he was awaiting with what patience he might, arrived from Bellister.

Meggie and her father were at one in wanting the exile home, and together they proved too strong for Mrs. Ridley.

"Ye'll please yersel', I reckon," she said to Ridley, when he wrote the summons, and, "Ye can please yersel', since yer father's pleased," she said again when her consent was asked to the wedding. It was her usual formula when her husband overruled her will. She pursed up her lips, indeed, and

sighed loudly as she looked at her son, but both John Ridley and Meggie were too well used to such demonstrations to heed them much. After all, Mrs. Ridley's bark was known to be worse than her bite.

So the young couple settled down beside the old in the ancient nest, which had sheltered both human beings and jackdaws for so many generations. Room was, also, found for Kelt and the Laird o' Cockpen beside the original canine inhabitants of Bellister. And it can, at least, be said that the four dogs agreed together quite as well as did their masters and mistresses. As time went on, the Laird and Viper especially came to be looked on with almost superstitious reverence by the members of the rising generation. For the young Grants associated them with the adventures of their father, and with the story of a certain bright star which they were never tired of pointing out. But the story these youngsters told was a different version to that of their grandfather, old Greyhound Geordie.

"Yon's the Dog-star," they were wont to say. "It's a lucky star for us. Daddy was born under that; and the Laird and Viper, and arl good tykes 'll go there when they die."

And Nick, when he heard the bairnies chatter, laughed, well pleased.

John Ridley is of the same opinion as his grandchildren. He, also, thinks that it was a lucky day for Bellister when he took in the friendless waif.

"If we've lost yan son," he sometimes says, as

he watches the tender patience with which Nick treats his poor fretful brother-in-law, "we've gained a better nor yon pier chap would ever hae been. He's kind and cliver and guid, is oor Nick, and whativer his forbears may have been—and naebody minds them now—there's not a mair well-respected mon in arl the country-side."

THE END.

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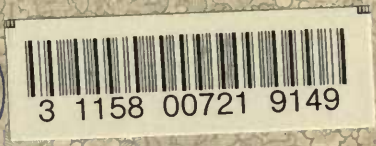
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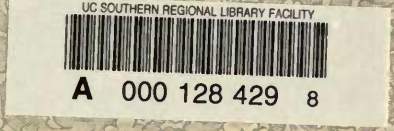
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